



THE BARON AGAIN

JOHN CREASEY

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About the Author



John Creasey – Master Storyteller - was born in Surrey, England in 1908 into a poor family in which there were nine children, John Creasey grew up to be a true master story teller and international sensation. His more than 600 crime, mystery and thriller titles have now sold 80 million copies in 25 languages. These include many popular series such as *Gideon of Scotland Yard*, *The Toff*, *Dr Palfrey* and *The Baron*.

Creasey wrote under many pseudonyms, explaining that booksellers had complained he totally dominated the ‘C’ section in stores. They included:

Gordon Ashe, M E Cooke, Norman Deane, Robert Caine Frazer, Patrick Gill, Michael Halliday, Charles Hogarth, Brian Hope, Colin Hughes, Kyle Hunt, Abel Mann, Peter Manton, J J Marric, Richard Martin, Rodney Mattheson, Anthony Morton and Jeremy York.

Never one to sit still, Creasey had a strong social conscience, and stood for Parliament several times, along with founding the *One Party Alliance* which promoted the idea of government by a coalition of the best minds from across the political spectrum.

He also founded the *British Crime Writers’ Association*, which to this day celebrates outstanding crime writing. *The Mystery Writers of America* bestowed upon him the *Edgar Award* for best novel and then in 1969 the ultimate *Grand Master Award*. John Creasey’s stories are as compelling today as ever.

Chapter One

Agony Column

Chief Inspector Bristow, of Scotland Yard, walked briskly from the police car towards the shining doors of the Elan Hotel. None of the several hundred people who must have glimpsed him as he crossed the wide stretch of Piccadilly pavement in front of the hotel realised that he was a policeman. Bristow, who was alone, looked the type of man who might be expected to spend an evening in the Elan, and September's late sun shone warmly on the fresh and fragrant gardenia in his button-hole. The sun also picked out the yellow stain of nicotine at his greying, close-clipped moustache.

A stolid commissioner, more acquainted than the average pedestrian with the officers of the law, saluted smartly.

"Good evening, sir. Mr. Gannet would like you to go straight to his office."

"Thanks," said Bristow, and pushed his way through the imposing revolving doors.

The clatter and roar of traffic and of hurrying feet on hot pavements dropped away into a distant murmur. Two or three shaded lights were burning, but the foyer of the Elan was more in the shadows than usual. It was practically empty. In one deep easy chair of dark brown plush a fair-haired young man was leaning back with a magazine held negligently in his left hand. His eyes turned hopefully towards the newcomer; he sighed a little, and then began to read the magazine again. An elderly woman, of majestic appearance, was waiting with obvious impatience on a settee. The peke in the lap of another woman snuffled and licked its lips. A small group of middle-aged men was gathered about a glass-topped table, and a hum of subdued conversation came from them.

“Big business or risqué stories,” Bristow thought as he turned right towards the café. He had to cross it to reach the manager’s office.

Bristow smiled a little, smoothing his moustache; there was a military precision in all his movements. A page-boy opened the café door, and Bristow stepped through.

At seven o’clock the café was as empty as the foyer. Two or three couples were playing with long soft drinks, and a little bunch was gathered round a cocktail bar at the far end. It was brilliantly lighted, and a dozen different colours glowed, warm and inviting. Only one couple sat between Bristow and the green-painted door marked, in small chromium letters, ‘Manager.’

Bristow saw the couple, and for the first time the smile at his lips disappeared. His grey eyes narrowed, lines coming suddenly to the corners.

The woman was dressed in a flowered frock, and was obviously not prepared for dinner at the Elan. She was dark, her brows and lashes a little too well-marked for real beauty, but her features were regular and smooth. A smile was lurking in her eyes, as if at a joke she could not share.

The man pushed his chair back and stood up. White teeth flashed for a second, emphasising the tan of his face. He would have been too handsome but for the lines of humour at his mouth and eyes, the latter hazel and wide-set. His dark hair was a little untidy, as though he had been out in a wind and combed it through hastily.

“Hallo, Bristow, on the prowl so early?” He offered his hand. Bristow hesitated a fraction of a second, bowed to the woman, and responded. The grip was firm.

“Good evening, Miss Fauntley. I thought you were abroad, Mannering. Have you been back long?”

“Since Monday,” said Mannering, and his smile deepened. “You’ve that old suspicious look, Bristow, but can you join us?”

“Thanks, I’m here on business,” Bristow said a little stiffly. “You’ve heard about it, I suppose?”

“We’ve only been in ten minutes.”

"Hmm." Bristow succeeded in creating an impression that he was not convinced that was the truth. "The house detective caught a man in one of the bedrooms. Fallon's suite," he added as though that explained a great deal. "There's some stuff gone, and they can't find it. I hope Mannering—"

Mannering smiled faintly.

"No, it's all right, Bill, I'm sure you won't find a ghost of evidence that the Baron's been busy."

"I hope not," said Bristow, still stiffly. He bowed again to Mannering and Lorna Fauntley, and stepped to the manager's door. He looked worried, as if the encounter with Mannering had been a severe jolt.

To Bristow, John Mannering and that cracksman extraordinary, the Baron, were one and the same. Although Bristow had never succeeded in securing evidence to put Mannering in dock, he believed that it existed.

For nearly six months there had been no word from the Baron, and little talk about him. When the Baron was busy there was always talk, and Bristow was content to let sleeping dogs lie. To have word, however, of a jewel robbery from Henry Fallon's suite, to know that some of that American jewel-collector's finer gems had disappeared, and then to find the most accomplished jewel-thief in London on the scene gave Bristow food for thought, although he knew that a man had already been detained.

It was unlike the Baron to work with an accomplice. In fact, if anyone had suggested the Elan burglary was the Baron's work, and then offered proof that two people had been engaged on it, Bristow would probably discount the suggestion.

He tapped on the office door, opened it and went through. Mannering and Lorna Fauntley were looking at each other amusedly. They did not catch a glimpse of the three men inside the office.

"Poor Bill," said Lorna, and Mannering shrugged.

"He hasn't much to grumble about, but he's losing his fire. He didn't make an open accusation—"

"He never has been a fool," Lorna said, and frowned a little.

That brought a groove between her brows, and made her look sullen, almost forbidding. She tapped the ash from her cigarette impatiently. "I wish—" she began, and then stopped abruptly.

"Go on," said Mannering.

The light laugh which followed did him good.

"Sorry, John; I shouldn't have started talking."

"No," Mannering responded dryly, "but you can think a lot. You wish, in fact, that it was possible to see a policeman without wondering whether he'll invite me to go with him to the nearest lock-up. It was rather a blow, seeing Bristow on our third day back in London."

"That's the trouble." Lorna was half-frowning. "In London we can't get away from it. I suppose I ought to be inured to it by now, but—"

"Once a cracksman always a cracksman," said Mannering, raising an eyebrow. "If three or four years passed and I lived a blameless life we'd always experience the same nausea in London. Bristow knows as well as several others at the Yard. Probably a dozen people, at the most, know or suspect that I'm the Baron—and practically every day we manage to meet one of them. I get a kick out of it," he confessed, slowly, "but it's not so good for you. All things considered, wouldn't it be wiser if we separated for—well, six months?" Lorna's eyes mocked him.

"A glorious idea! You'd probably say the same if we were married. No. And don't take me too seriously, John, it was just meeting Bristow and seeing that look in his eyes—that's right, laugh!"

"I wonder if Bill realises what a sensation he causes every time he looks at you?" asked Mannering. "Seriously, it would be a different proposition if we were married. We can't canter off together for too long as things are, for decency's sake." His face was set, now, and he played with a match. "That accursed husband of yours—"

"Still in prison."

"What grand people you get to know," said Mannering with a touch of bitterness. "Sorry, remark withdrawn! I suppose one of these fine days you'll really try to get a divorce?" Lorna did not

answer directly.

"You're the Baron and that's always with us," she said. "I'm married to a rogue and we can't get away from that either. No wonder I hated the idea of coming back to London. John—"

"Easy, my sweet," said Mannering, but she did not seem to hear him as she went on: "I've never had illusions about Rennigan, and there are grounds enough for divorce, but we've been over the ground so often. It would break both my mother and father. I've been worked up a dozen times to the point of telling them, but something always prevents me. It's damnably unfair to you, and—well, I often think you'd be happier with someone who doesn't know you as the Baron, who will get a kick out of marrying the renowned John Mannering. It would help you to put the Baron behind you, too. I'm a constant reminder of it, and while things remain as they are, you get bitter—and bitterness is likely to encourage the Baron. The surest way of burying the Baron for good is to marry someone who—"

"Would nib their hands in anticipation of an orgy of spending, wonder how many diamonds I really possess, and babble and chatter inanities. She would doubtless present me with three or four children and pray they'd be like me—and serve," he added, softly, "to remind me every minute what a damned fool I had been not to tell your father and mother just why we haven't married, make you face up to a scandal that wouldn't worry you a tinker's curse, but might shock them for half an hour, and lose us some of our more righteous acquaintances. Stalemate, darling, and the subject of divorce is barred for another six months. I hereby promise to preserve your secret, too. Agreed?"

"You're not getting younger, John. You're thirty-seven. If you forgot about me you would have your first real chance of putting the Baron behind you."

"I've been the Baron for just over three years," said Mannering, slowly, "and he's been inactive for six months. There being more than enough of my ill-gotten gains to provide a reasonable income, short of war, earthquakes or the complete

collapse of the economic system, the Baron is likely to remain inactive for ever, to the delight of Bristow, you, and a few others. The only folk who might regret it," added John Mannering with a smile, "are the daily papers. They'll miss him. They've whitewashed me until I'm more Robin Hood than the bold, bad Baron."

Lorna did not look amused.

"If they knew the whole truth you'd be a public hero," she assured him. "Do you know, John, that's a thing that helps me more than anything else. You've helped others far more than you've helped yourself. I—"

"More in that strain," said Mannering, lightly, "and you'll start me blushing. Hallo, here comes the prisoner."

The manager's door opened. Bristow came out first; Raoul Gannet, the Elan's manager, bowed him out of the office. Next came a middle-aged, thick-set man in ill-cut, ready-made clothes. He looked thoroughly dejected, and from beneath bushy, black brows his glance shifted in all directions. Tilford, the hotel detective at the Elan, followed.

Bristow and Tilford nodded to Mannering, who watched the little party disappear.

"That prisoner's not much like the Baron," Mannering said. "Well, after a day in the country, what's on for the evening? A dutiful daughter at home? A show? The studio? Or my flat?"

"Mother's dining alone, and I'd like to be with her," Lorna said. "Will you come round later?"

"Gladly. I'll run you home first."

His Lagonda was parked in a side street near the Regal, and ten minutes later he pulled up outside the Portland Terrace home of Lord Fauntley, who spent a great deal of his time wondering, in his ignorance, why his daughter and Mannering delayed getting married. It would be a good match; they had been unofficially engaged too long, he thought, and more than once he had heard people talking.

One of the banes of Fauntley's life was 'people talking.'

Lucy, his wife, appeared to care for nothing, rumours or facts. As Mannering handed Lorna out of the car he wondered

why she was convinced that the prospects of a divorce (and the play that the dailies would undoubtedly make of it) would be a severe blow to her mother.

His problem, however, was probably far simpler than many; better to remain unmarried than to make a hash of it. The situation was damnable for Lorna, nevertheless. He should not keep worrying her about divorce.

At the corner of Portland Place and Regent Street he bought an *Evening Wire*, without glancing at it until he had garaged the Lagonda in a mews conveniently situated for his Clarges Street flat. He was feeling pleasantly tired, and looking forward to a bath.

They had been as far as the South Downs, spent three or four of the midday hours walking – but for an hour spent at a village inn, where Lorna had demanded bread-and-cheese and shandy rather than the one-and-sixpenny luncheon – and driven back at their leisure. Mannering hardly knew even now why they had chosen to go to the Elan. The roads had been dusty, London seemed to reek more than usual with petrol fumes, and he had suggested a long drink; that had led to the meeting with Bristow.

Then the old trouble had cropped up.

He was the Baron, and he could never again know complete freedom from anxiety; there were moments when he would have given every penny he possessed to cancel out the three years of the Baron's existence.

He had started the jewel thefts cold-bloodedly enough, and afterwards the excitement had got into him – that of constantly pitting his wits against the police. If he had a real consolation now, it was that opportunities had occurred for helping others, opportunities which would never have been presented had he been simply John Mannering, and not the Baron. Moreover, he had never knowingly robbed a man who would suffer greatly from the loss.

Mannering, whistling a little, stood by the table and opened the *Evening Wire*.

His eyes grew suddenly hard and wary.

The foreign news that had been the staple diet of the evening papers since the finish of the Test Matches with Australia, had for once been displaced from the headlines. A well-known racing motorist had just failed to beat the existing record at Daytona. A woman's body had been found in the New Forest, and foul play was suspected. Centred so as to catch the eye immediately, however, were the headlines:

APPEAL TO "THE BARON" Agony Column Request to Notorious
Cracksman

Mannering read through the paragraphs quickly, only his eyes moving to and fro. He had said half-jokingly to Lorna that the Press would regret his retirement; here was all the proof he needed of his news value.

The advertisement had appeared in the personal columns of the morning papers, and the *Evening Wire* made all possible capital out of it. "Behind this appeal," it ran, "lies a poignant story which the public will probably never know. But in the past the Baron has responded to the call of sentiment, a characteristic that has made him vitally different from the ordinary jewel-thief. Will he refuse this time? Or—"

The 'agony advertisement' was reproduced in the centre of the letter-press, and ringed round like a memorial card. It was simple and direct, and had Mannering glanced down the personal columns that morning he must have seen it.

"To the Baron. On Friday last, when you visited the Maycourt Hotel, a small diamond ring valued at £50 was with the other jewels taken. To you it is valueless. Sentimentally it is priceless to me. *Please* return to Alder & Claythorne, Solicitors, Ardley Place, S.W.I."

Mannering read it for a second time, and then thrust his hands into his pockets.

"On Friday last," he said to the room at large, "I was on the *Acquania*, two days out of New York. Who in the wide world told you that the Baron had been busy?"

He pushed the paper away, and went thoughtfully into his bedroom, undressed and went to the bathroom. After a cold shower, he towelled vigorously.

“I wonder who advertised?” he mused, and then a thought flashed into his mind. “And I wonder who knows who took the stone? It couldn’t have been a big haul or it would have been in the Sunday papers. Friday, at the Maycourt—well, Levenson will know.”

One of the necessary stocks-in-trade of the Baron was the ability to change at short notice, and it was just as necessary to do without the services of a man. The service flat met all his requirements, however, and he was used to doing odd jobs for himself.

He telephoned the restaurant for a table for dinner at eight o’clock, and then sat in an easy chair, smoking. The Baron’s career was over, although not because of its dangers; there were moments when he longed to be busy again. He did not need money, though, and Lorna was worried whenever he was working; and there was no reason for the Baron to be active.

Others probably assumed he was still working.

The man or woman who had advertised that morning must have been convinced that the Baron had stolen the solitaire ring. Had an indiscreet reporter suggested it or had the obviously naive advertiser (the wording suggested an unpractised hand, despite the fact that the address was a solicitor’s) simply assumed that a jewel robbery and the Baron were synonymous? No, that was unlikely.

The immediate problem was whether or not to telephone Levenson.

He had renounced cracksmanship, and at the same time determined not to get in touch with those people whom he knew in what polite circles called the criminal fraternity.

Flick – or Mr. Arthur – Levenson was a buyer of stolen goods on a considerable scale. Apart from that he was as trustworthy and honest as any man Mannering knew – far more honest, he would say cynically, than the average business man. Although Levenson would know what jewels had been stolen from the

Maycourt, and possibly be able to guess at the identity of the thief, he was on the wrong side of the line dividing Mannering from the Baron.

If there was a serious suggestion that the Baron had been busy, however, it was as well to know the reason for the assumption.

It was even possible that evidence would be forthcoming which would put him in some danger. On the other hand, it might prove a godsend. Supposing Bristow and the Yard were convinced that the Baron had been at work while Mannering had been on board ship? True, he would take some convincing, but he would have to believe the evidence if it were strong enough. It would relieve the Baron of suspicion, it would free him for all time from the attention of the police.

The possibilities went much deeper than he had seen at first sight. Neither Bristow nor any policeman had proof of his dual identity; only that had kept him out of jail. If they were faced with an unbreakable alibi for a burglary which they admitted was the Baron's, they would have to admit themselves wrong in the past.

Mannering stubbed out his cigarette, and reached for the telephone. Soon he was connected with Leverson's Aldgate house, and the pleasant voice of the fence came guardedly. "Who is that?"

"Mannering," said Mannering, and the other's voice promptly changed.

"Hallo, Mannering, I'm glad you're back! What can I do for you?"

"I'm not sure yet whether you can do anything," said Mannering. "Do you know much about the robbery at the Maycourt last week?"

"I believe that two or three thousand pounds' worth of small stuff was taken," said Leverson. "One or two pieces have been seen—all rubies, I think. Why?"

"Get an *Evening Wire*, and find out," said Mannering. "Who burned his fingers, do you know?"

"I don't know," said Leverson.

"A pity," said Mannering, knowing that Leverson would have told him had he known the thief, even if he had not wanted to give him away. "If you hear anything let me know, will you?"

"Yes, of course," promised Leverson. "I suppose the *Sun's* show affected you."

Mannering was surprised by the mention of one of the more sensational morning papers.

"What kind of show?" he asked.

"Oh, the usual shortage of news, and the old canard suggesting that the burglar was the Baron. None of the other papers took it up, and the *Sun* dropped it after one edition."

"It's time the Baron started thinking of legal actions for libel," Mannering said, grimly. "All right, Flick, and many thanks. Are you keeping well?"

They chatted for a few minutes on matters outside the orbit of jewel-thieves and expert fences, but when Mannering replaced the receiver he was much more thoughtful. He badly wanted to know who had advertised for the ring, and was tempted to make inquiries. Then he reminded himself that he was thinking as the Baron, not Mannering; if he was to keep faith with himself, he must take no action.

He had only partially convinced himself when the telephone rang, and his expression brightened when he heard Lorna's voice.

"Is that you, darling?"

"Have you changed your mind about a show?" he asked.

"No." He was quick to sense the note of urgency in her voice. "Can you come to dinner, after all? I think you'd better. It's about—But have you seen the *Wire*?"

"So that's got round," said Mannering, sadly. "Yes, I've seen it, and I'll be over in twenty minutes. Is the news good, bad or indifferent?"

"I don't know yet," said Lorna, "but the girl's here, and there appears to be a complication. We'll keep dinner till eight, so try not to be later."

Chapter Two

Complications

Mannering pondered for some time over the fact that the Personal Column advertiser was to dine at the Fauntley's house, of all places. It might prove a sheer coincidence, but he had no great faith in that.

Was it possible that the woman – he had begun to take the sex for granted, before Lorna's 'girl', without pausing to ask why – had some idea of his identity? Had there been a leakage of information, leading her to Lorna for the purpose of making a more direct personal appeal?

The possibility worried him, but he tried to console himself with the probability that Lady Fauntley had been responsible for the visit. The peeress had a habit of dabbling in other folks' affairs in a friendly and disingenuous manner which made it impossible to take offence. Many people had cause to be grateful for her interest.

Had he known all that was in her mind that day he would have been aghast!

It was nearly eighteen months since the Baron had saved Lord Fauntley from a catastrophic financial crash due to the operations of a stockbroker who no longer operated on the Exchange. At that time, Lady Fauntley had considered, in her quiet way, the remarkably convenient way in which Mannering had been able to forecast the actions of the Baron, and to benefit from them.

She was a little woman, turning grey and fading, yet not trying unduly to offset the passing of years. Above all, she was always natural. Mannering had a considerable regard for her, despite the fact that she was the unwitting stumbling block to a divorce for Lorna, and hence to his marriage.

In her short-sighted and absent-minded way – the absentmindedness perhaps more illusionary than real – she suspected Mannering’s dual identity, but probably because her husband owed his fortune and reputation to the Baron, it did not shock her. She nursed the belief to herself, confiding neither in her husband – who was at a Midlands political meeting that night – nor Lorna, but always smiling with quaint humour at the varied stories circulating about the Baron. Never had Mannering dreamed of her shrewd conclusions; that was a splendid testimony to Lady Fauntley’s power of dissimulation.

When she read the Personal Column appeal, she suspected there was a mistake; Mannering could not have stolen the jewels from the Maycourt Hotel. The development worried her, however. She was not a client of Messrs. Alder & Claythorne, but that old-established and respectable firm handled the affairs of many of her friends.

Putting apparently innocent questions into a conversation over the telephone, she learned that the jewels had been stolen from the fiancé of one of last year’s debutantes, Marion Delray. She knew Marion; and she also knew that the girl was under the guardianship of an aunt, the widowed Mrs. Gertrude Willison.

Lady Fauntley did not number Mrs. Willison among her closer friends, but she had known Marion’s mother, and she liked the girl. That was sufficient justification for her to make further discreet inquiries. Although she had no proof, she felt sure Marion Delray was the advertiser.

Did Mrs. Willison know?

Lady Fauntley had telephoned the aunt, and invited her to dinner.

“And *do* bring that charming niece of yours, Gertrude—Annebel, isn’t it? but I really am so bad on names, I remember how *charming* she looked when she was presented, I’m *sure* she was the success of the evening, *do* if you can.”

“You mean Marion,” corrected Mrs. Willison. “Of course, and she will be delighted.”

“Well, that’s nice of her, and you, I’m sure. And Gertrude, *did* you see that astonishing advertisement in the papers this

morning, so *rare* I thought, Hugo was saying it was so much money wasted, but I'm not *sure*—”

After ten minutes' conversation she was satisfied that Gertrude Willison had no idea that her niece had arranged to insert the advertisement. That was puzzling, but it was possible that Mrs. Willison believed the girl's fiancé was behind it. Lady Fauntley began to wonder about the fiancé who would allow his beloved to act in his place, but she was tolerably contented because Marion would be at dinner. Lorna would bring John the moment she knew who was coming; and it was strange how easy it was to understand Lorna, bless the child! Lorna had always preferred to be indifferent to the Baron, and yet obviously nervy and irritable when the Baron was busy.

If the poor girl really needed help, Mannering was just the man to supply it. Lady Fauntley had played her part, and she was content to leave the rest to the others.

If she was pleased with the results of her modest little plot and Gertrude Willison was delighted at the peeress's interest in her ward, Marion Delray wished the peeress and her aunt to perdition, and was on tenterhooks all day.

Believing that there was considerable sentiment in the Baron's make-up, she had put a great deal of hope in the appeal. The Baron's reputation was widespread, and there were many who looked on him as a modern Robin Hood. She had appealed to him because the *Sun* had seemed so sure of the identity of the thief. Now she had to force thought of it to the back of her mind and play her part in the small talk at dinner. Small talk had never appealed to her, and with the suspense she was feeling dinner threatened to be an ordeal.

At seven o'clock, when she saw Lorna again – they had been acquainted for years – she realised that for once a dinner with her aunt was going to be a relief.

The peeress had dropped a quiet and cautious word to Lorna.

“Of course, her aunt doesn't know about the advertisement, my dear, but I thought you would like to.”

Lorna, always jealous for Mannering, and in any case curious, had set herself to get Marion to talk. This was easy, for

the girl had been bursting to confide in someone. Lorna's manner was a perfect blend of concern and optimism, and the girl felt relieved and a little excited. John Mannering would be at dinner, and he had the reputation of being one of the most charming men in London. To cap it, Lorna had hinted that Mannering, as a jewel collector, *might* be able to help.

The situation was ripe for Mannering; and for the Baron.

If Marion Delray lacked the subtler intelligence of Lorna, the Baron nevertheless took to her. When trying to grapple with conversational gambits a little above her, her tense manner broke down occasionally with a merry and unaffected: "Of course, what an idiot I am! But don't you think—?"

It was the same naivete that had shown itself in the 'agony' appeal.

She was fair, and her hair was dressed plainly, and a little carelessly. She used little make-up, but contrived to look fresh and vivid. A pair of blue, frank and admiring eyes were directed towards Mannering most of the dinner-time. In a year or two, thought Mannering, she would be really lovely; now, a month or two past her twenty-first birthday, she seemed little more than a school-girl. Poise and affectation were both missing, a refreshing change from the majority of her contemporaries.

If she were worried she contrived to hide it well, but Mannering watched her closely, waiting for the slightest sign that she was suspicious of his identity. Nothing happened to alarm him, but he found it difficult to concentrate on small talk. Luckily Lady Fauntley was in her most discursive mood.

Gertrude Willison wondered, a little guiltily, whether it was true that Mannering and Lorna were engaged, and if not, Marion might perhaps—

"I'm so sorry, John," said Lady Fauntley, "that you're the only man, two friends were coming and they had to back out, but you're one of us, so you won't feel out of place. *Gertrude*, don't you think it would be an excellent idea if we sent the younger folk into the lounge while you come upstairs with me? I so want to talk about the Orphanage Ball, and your experience will be invaluable. Shall I tell Mason to send liqueurs in. John,

you'll have a brandy I suppose—?" She was like a contented hen as she fussed about them, and Marion Delray suspected that the 'younger folk' had been deliberately freed from the stiff, dry-faced and sharp-eyed Mrs. Willison.

As Marion sat in an easy chair, the Cambridge blue of her dress shining in the subdued light of the lounge, her eyes were very bright. When Lorna poured coffee, Marion was tapping one high heel against the floor. That might have been from habit or from nervousness. Mannering sat opposite her, Lorna between them, on a pouffe.

"Well," said Lorna practically, "I promised I'd let you talk to him, Marion, and now's the chance. Yes, he knows about the advertisement, but nothing else. Black or white?" Marion eased herself up a little in the chair.

"Very white, please—well, it's difficult, Mr. Mannering, I hardly know how to begin. It—you see—" She was playing with the fingers of her left hand, forgetting the coffee, and her voice dropped a little. "We were—are I mean—engaged."

Mannering nodded and smiled, and passed her cup, waiting for an explanation of that nervous statement.

"Oh, thanks. Well, it's rather a rotten thing to say, but I just daren't keep things at home. Aunt sees them all. So when Brian bought the ring a month ago, and yet we still had to keep it secret because of Aunt Gertrude, *he* kept the ring, and I only wore it when I was with him. Not very often, I'm afraid, but usually three or four times a month. Brian travels about a lot, he's a sales representative you see, that's chiefly why Aunt doesn't like him. He was at the Maycourt just that one night, and the Baron—"

Mannering broke in.

"Why are you so sure that it was the Baron?"

"Well, I don't know now. I read the *Sun*—I happened to pick up last Saturday's paper yesterday morning—and I thought it was worth a chance. Anyhow, the thief might read it even if it wasn't the Baron, and—" she broke off, stirring her coffee too quickly. "I half wish now that I hadn't advertised. I'm afraid Aunt Gertrude might find it was me, but I did it on the spur of

the moment. Brian rang up to say he'd been sent to Cornwall, and I was afraid to wait until he came back. Do you seriously think there's a way of getting the ring back, Mr. Mannering? I—I feel so badly about it. Brian spent more than he could really afford on it, and—”

“There's always a chance,” said Mannering, “especially with a small ring where the stone would not need cutting before it was re-sold. Would Brian—or Mr.—?”

“Halliwell.”

“—be able to get particulars from the jeweller he bought it from, do you think?”

“I expect he'd have details himself, as he's in the trade. But I don't like worrying him, he's dreadfully upset by the whole thing. You see the other jewels weren't his. He travels for Kingley's, and he should really have taken the stones to the shop, but he met a friend, and he only left them in the hotel bedroom for half an hour. It wasn't until he reached Kingley's that he discovered the case was empty. Mr. Kingley's a pretty decent sort—but—well, Brian feels badly about it. Besides, there are the other directors, and if they think the loss was due to his carelessness, it will mean that he loses the job with Kingley's. It would make a big difference to us.”

Mannering was filling in the gaps as she went along. She was trying to be loyal to Aunt Gertrude, and obviously hedging at some points, but in the main the story was straightforward.

Brian Halliwell had been fool enough to leave two or three thousand pounds'-worth of jewels in an hotel bedroom, and as a result of the loss he would almost certainly be dismissed. Kingley's were an old firm, but they would not risk employing careless representatives. If young Halliwell lost his job, it would probably mean a long time before he and Marion could think of marrying. Mrs. Willison was already set firmly against the match, and would be worse if Halliwell had no income; and judging from the story, he depended entirely on his work for his income.

It flashed through Mannering's mind that there might be more in it than appeared on the surface. Halliwell *might* have

concocted the story. The police would be quick to see that possibility though, and would not have allowed him to go so far from London. If Halliwell was in Cornwall, the police must be satisfied of his innocence.

Could he help? Mannering wondered.

Unless by chance Leverson or another fence had the solitaire ring through his hands, there seemed little chance of getting it back. He disliked telling Marion so, however, and a thought occurred to him.

“Was your ring with a parcel of others?”

“In the same case; Brian always keeps it in a special pocket, and as the case is rarely out of his sight it’s pretty safe. Brian’s always so devilishly hard up—” She stopped, colouring quickly. “But I mustn’t bother you with it any more, Mr. Mannering, although if you could find anything I’d be extremely grateful.”

“I’ll do all I can,” promised Mannering. “But surely your aunt saw the report of the burglary? Mr. Halliwell’s name must have been mentioned.”

“Well, no, she practically only reads the social columns.”

“A perfect summing-up of Mrs. Willison,” thought Mannering. “And if Kingley’s know that young Halliwell is always hard up, it might make them very thoughtful. It would make me think, not to mention the police. I wonder if the girl’s picked a loser?”

He would have wondered still more if he had known that Brian Halliwell was in London, not in Cornwall, and had he been able to see him in Kingley’s study, about the time that Lady Fauntley and Mrs. Willison joined the others, it would certainly have occurred to him Halliwell was protesting his innocence almost too vehemently.

Matthew Kingley, of Kingley’s Limited, – perhaps the oldest and most reputable firm in Hatton Garden – was at times inclined to be too trusting. He took the usual precautions, of course, but Halliwell was not the first young man who had succeeded in getting a post with Kingley’s Limited more because he needed work than because he was an expert salesman.

Halliwell had a good enough reputation. Educated at Eton, it had been confidently expected that he would enter the Navy, where his father and grandfather had served before him. The Halliwell finances had suffered badly in the slump, however, and Brian had been compelled to give up all idea of a Naval career. He had not proved a marked success in an office, and when it was suggested that Kingley could employ him, he had been doubtful of getting the job. Kingley's failing had served Brian perfectly. He had not been a brilliant employee, but he had no notable failures. The affair at the Maycourt Hotel had been the first approach to disaster.

Kingley had held the interview in his private house.

Kingley was a small, grey-haired man, with tufts of hair at his brows and sprouting from his ears. His pink and white complexion suggested a sensitive skin and great care with his diet. His eyes were rather prominent, but friendly. He had a soft voice, and an old-fashioned habit of rolling his phrases.

Halliwell, above middle-height and sturdily built, was rugged rather than handsome, and by no means characterless to judge from his square chin and his wide-set blue eyes. He was standing in front of the old man's desk.

"But I give you my word, Mr. Kingley, I know nothing at all about it until I reached the office! Hang it, if I'd known the case was empty I would have telephoned from the hotel, to you and the police. It stands to reason."

Kingley shook his head.

"My dear Halliwell, nothing stands to reason. I don't like having to force this unpleasant interview upon you, but I am not entirely my own master in the matter. The police tell me that there is no evidence at all that anyone else burgled the hotel that evening. No stranger was seen—"

"Damn it," Halliwell half-shouted, "who was there to see them? And the fellow would take good care he wasn't noticed, wouldn't he?"

"Please, please! There is not the slightest reason why we should get agitated. I am stating the opinion of the police, not my own. They told me, frankly, that on the surface it appeared

that you had taken the stones, and that the talk of a theft was a—er—bluff, I think is the word they used. Only by an earnest request has it been made possible for me to talk to you here, instead of the police questioning you at—er—a police station. Now, Halliwell, for your family's sake, please tell me the truth. If you took the stones because you are short of money, perhaps in debt, return them, and I will undertake to satisfy the police. I will even help you out of any urgent financial trouble."

Halliwell's cheeks were turning a dark red, and his eyes looked angry.

"I see. So you think I took them?"

Kingley shrugged his shoulders; his white hands were spread over the desk, fingers wide apart.

"My boy, it was as much my fault as yours if you did. The temptation was a considerable one, and many excellent young fellows have fallen to just such a mistake. The world may not —"

Halliwell's lips were quivering, and his fists were clenched. "I didn't take the damned things! I'd no idea they were gone, and they were certainly in the case when I booked my room at the Maycourt. Someone followed me, opened the case and took them out. That's what I told you in the first place, and it's true. I don't care a damn what the police say. I didn't steal them! Is that enough?"

Kingley was looking even more troubled.

"I am quite prepared to accept your word for it, my boy, but you will, of course, have to suffer from the suspicions of the police."

"They wouldn't harass me if you told them you were sure I was innocent," snapped Halliwell, his temper dangerously out of control.

Kingley's voice hardened.

"You are forgetting yourself, Halliwell. As I have told you, I have a responsibility to my co-directors—you know that as well as I do. Unless the jewels are found there must be a wider inquiry."

"The damned things were insured, weren't they?"

"That is beside the point. And in any case, the insurance company will be anxious to learn the truth. Once you leave here, Halliwell, I can do nothing to help you."

Halliwell's voice grew suddenly hoarse.

"Unless I admit taking the stones, you mean? Supposing you asked the police to find the Baron, instead of accusing me?"

"Nonsense! Inspector Bristow himself tells me that the Baron certainly did not commit the crime."

"Seeing that the Baron has been working for years, and they have never found him, how do they know that? Anyhow, *someone* took them. I wish to Heaven I'd never accepted your job."

Kingley stood up abruptly.

"That is enough, Halliwell. You can show yourself out. Your month's cheque will be posted to you tomorrow, and from then onwards the matter becomes entirely your affair."

Halliwell was standing very still, his expression that of a man who saw his last hope dwindling. He hesitated for a second, and then stepped forward, hands going out in appeal.

"I—I'm sorry I got rattled, sir. This means absolute ruin for me. The police know I needed money, and—and you *can* persuade them that I didn't take the jewels. Hang it, I only needed a hundred pounds or so, and—"

"I'm sorry," said Kingley coldly, "there is nothing I can do."

Halliwell swung on his heel. Kingley sat watching him, until the door of the well-furnished study closed. Then the diamond merchant shrugged his shoulders, took a set of keys from his pocket, and opened his safe. From his pocket he took a single diamond, wrapped in cotton wool, and put it to rest beside two piles of Bank of England notes, and several other un-set stones. The bright light above his desk scintillated on them before he closed the door.

Just an hour later Kingley's butler, coming to enquire if there were further orders for the night, got no answer, and opened the study door. He found Kingley lying against the desk, and the hairy tuft at his right ear was covered with blood. The safe was wide open and empty.

Chapter Three

Missing and Wanted

Chief-Inspector Bristow had reached his Chelsea home at ten o'clock, after an hour spent in questioning the man found at the Elan Hotel, without results, half an hour spent in assuring the victim of the theft that his gems would be recovered, and twenty minutes discussing the case with Superintendent Lynch. Lynch had been in an easy chair at Hampstead, grunting comments into the telephone.

The only time the Superintendent had shown keen interest had been when he had asked: "Do you think this ties up with the Maycourt affair, Bill?"

"It's ten to one that was Halliwell."

"The odd one does turn up," Lynch had said; he was something of a philosopher. "Look round it, will you, and we'll try again in the morning. Tired?"

"It's a month since I had an evening at home," Bristow had grumbled.

"That's a lie, you had two in succession last week. Eh?" Lynch's voice had grown dimmer. "Hold on, Bill. You there—? My wife wants to know when you and Mary can come over for a day—a Sunday, yes. Free next week? All right, old man. Goodnight."

Bristow had grown less disgruntled. Lynch was a good man to work with, and he always took his fair share of the worst cases. He was wrong, however, in linking the hotel jobs together; just as wrong as he, Bristow, had been in worrying about the Baron. Bristow felt fairly sure of both things.

Mannerling had done some risky things in his time, but he would never be such a fool as to sit outside the manager's door while an accomplice was inside, under arrest. Besides – Bristow

was a cautious man, and had made inquiries – Mannering had been on the *Acquania*. The liner had not called at Cherbourg, and Mannering had had no chance of flying to London in time for the Maycourt burglary.

Young Halliwell had no alibi, and virtually no defence. Bristow was inclined to take it for granted that another likeable youngster had kicked over the traces.

On the day of the Elan burglary Mannering's Lagonda had been seen at Kingston, just after six o'clock. It had been seen again at Putney, and had driven into the Elan's parking-place at ten minutes to seven; there were several independent witnesses to that. Mannering seemed clear enough on both jobs. On the other hand, Mannering had the wit to appreciate that similar methods would not always succeed. It was just possible that he had finished working on his own, and was using accomplices. If that were so, he would have alibis for all the crimes of which he was suspected.

With his coat off, slippers instead of shoes, and a pipe going well, Bristow pondered over this possibility until he grew drowsy. At eleven o'clock he glanced at his wife, who was reading a thriller.

"Ready, Mary?"

"I'll just finish this chapter."

Bristow nodded, and stared at the ceiling. One of the difficulties of C.I.D. work was the hopelessness of getting a complete rest. He wished Halliwell would confess. It would make the Maycourt affair much simpler. The fellow found at the Elan was a well-known cracksman, named Loffatt. He rarely ventured high-class hotel work, but he had certainly opened the safe in Fallon's room while someone else had been waiting for the jewels. No doubt he hoped to escape a long sentence as the gems were not found in his possession. His story of having entered the room by mistake was worthless.

Brrr-brrh.

Mary Bristow's head jerked up, and Bristow said: "Oh, damn!"

The telephone was in a corner of the living-room. Mrs.

Bristow, plump, pleasant and resigned to sudden calls, went into the scullery to brush Bill's shoes, while Bristow took up the receiver.

"Yes, who is it?"

"Sergeant Tring, sir. I thought you'd better know at once, sir."

"What's the matter now?" Bristow was not usually short, even with the estimable but slow-thinking Detective-Sergeant Tring, who was an expert on finger-prints and searching, but somewhat disconcerted when he had to think deeply without help.

"That Halliwell-Kingley case, sir. Kingley's been found dead, shot through the head, but there seems no suggestion of suicide. That's what K.A.I. Division says."

"Hampstead, eh?" Bristow thought of Lynch. "Have you told the Superintendent?"

"No, sir, I thought you—"

"Ring him," said Bristow, "and then get over to Kingley's place. Is it hot?"

"Pretty well, sir. Kingley's house was only ten minutes from the Divisional station—the butler says it was a quarter to eleven when he found the body."

"Humph, I'll be along," said Bristow, and rang off. "Mary, I've got—oh, good girl." He smiled at his wife, brushed a hand still holding the pipe across his lips, and kissed her. "Looking forward to retirement?"

Mary laughed.

"You've got another ten years yet, Bill, and it doesn't do to be too anxious. What is it?"

"Not sure yet," said Bristow, who knew that she hated the days spent on murder cases. She had a suspicion that there was always a possibility of the police being shot if they discovered too much, and a ravenous reading of thrillers fed the conviction. "That Kingley jewel affair, I think. Do you know where my cigarettes are?"

Mary had learned from experience that it was useless to suggest he should wait long enough for a cup of tea or coffee,

and Bristow was grateful for her understanding. He had forgotten her, however, by the time he took his Morris Ten out of the garage next to the house for a cross-London run to Hampstead.

Kingley was rather a nice, inoffensive fellow, as far as Bristow knew him. Kingley's had surprising little trouble, except with defaulting salesmen. That was a weakness of the old man's, of which Halliwell seemed to have taken advantage. Apparently it had brought Kingley to this violent end.

"We ought to have pulled Halliwell in," Bristow said to an empty King Street. "But it would have meant a stink if he is all right."

He reached Hampstead in half an hour, driving through roads clear of traffic. Lights were blazing from Kingley's house, which stood in its own grounds of half an acre or more. Bristow had been there several times. Three cars were standing in the drive, and he recognised a Squad car as well as Lynch's. The third probably belonged to the doctor.

Lynch had only just arrived. He was standing with his hands in his pockets and looking pensively down at the body of the murdered jewel merchant. A big man. Over-inclined to stoutness, Lynch dressed expensively, and yet always appeared untidy. He was pursing his thick lips a little and the bright light over the desk made his hair seem greyer and thinner than usual.

"Hallo, Bill." He had not looked up, but he was uncanny in recognising people. "Pretty nasty. Thought I'd come over, as it's in my home territory. Dead about an hour, the surgeon says. One shot. No one heard a thing. The photographs have been done, and Tring's busy."

Tring, a gangling, melancholy man of slurring speech, was occupying himself spreading a light grey powder on various objects in the room, and then brushing it off carefully with a small camel-hair brush. Bristow went towards him.

"Getting anything?"

"Plenty. Too many," said Tring, holding up a black leather wallet, where a dozen or more finger-prints showed clear and grey. "All perfect. I like shiny surfaces."

"Tried the door and window?"

"The door's next," said Tring, "there's nothing on the window."

Lynch turned to Bristow. "Let's get into the next room. I've asked for Kingley's partners to call here. They all seem worried. The safe's empty, and apparently he had a lot of stuff here."

"Did he?" said Bristow heavily.

"Looks hot, eh? Halliwell's been here tonight."

Bristow stopped searching for his cigarette-case.

"Halliwell, eh! We should have held him. You've put a call out?"

"Yes, a general. He's not at his hotel yet, but that's not surprising." They were entering the morning-room, convenient for their use, and Lynch added an aside. "Kingley was a widower, and there's only the servants to worry about. There's a son in Australia."

"Hmm," said Bristow, and pulled up short as he saw someone else in the room, a pale-faced, well-fed looking man, who held his arms stiffly at his sides. Bristow could see that he was a butler.

"Sit down, Makin, sit down." Lynch hoisted himself to a corner of the table, one leg swinging, the other leg on the floor. "Now take your time, and tell us just what happened tonight. Start from the time Mr. Kingley came home. What time was that?"

"As—as usual, sir, about six-thirty." Makin's voice was hoarse, but whether that was natural or brought on by emotion Bristow could not tell. "He had dinner at seven, alone as usual, sir. He was in his study from—from a quarter to eight until nine-fifteen, sir, reading. I—I came in several times, when he rang for me." Makin finished breathlessly, as though the statement had been stored up for hours.

"What did he ring for?"

"A—a light ale, sir, he always had one half an hour before dinner—and then some matches, sir. And—and the last time to say Mr. Halliwell was coming."

"Were there any phone calls?"

"None, sir, at least I didn't hear any, and the bell's very loud. Everything—everything seemed quite as usual, sir."

"At what time did Mr. Halliwell arrive?"

"Just after nine-thirty, sir."

"Did you notice anything out of the ordinary with him?"

"Well—well hardly that, sir. He seemed worried, but then this burglary, sir, it would upset him, wouldn't it?"

A point in Halliwell's favour, thought Bristow.

"What time did he leave?"

Makin lifted his hands from his sides in an appealing gesture that suggested he had no desire to talk.

"I—I don't know, sir. I—didn't hear him go."

"Don't you usually show the callers out?"

"Not always, sir. Not business callers. Mr.—Mr. Kingley was most considerate, sir, and did not disturb the staff unless it was necessary."

Bristow was frowning; he could not forget young Halliwell.

"I see," Lynch went on after a pause. "Did you hear anything of the conversation?"

Makin was intertwining his hands now, and he looked thoroughly unhappy.

"W-well, sir, I had to go to the front door for the post, sir, about a quarter to ten. I heard Mr. Halliwell shouting, but I didn't catch what he said. There were no letters for Mr. Kingley, so I didn't need to interrupt, sir."

Lynch rubbed his chin slowly, making the stubble rasp.

"Shouting, eh? Can't you hear everything from the study when voices are raised?"

"Not—not very clearly, sir."

"Not even a few words?" asked Lynch, and Makin drew a sharp breath. Obviously he hated to talk about Halliwell.

"Well—well, sir, it wouldn't be fair to say I heard it, because I can't be sure. But it sounded as though—as though Mr. Halliwell was saying Mr. Kingley could help him, and wouldn't, sir. I—"

"Come, come, man, the fact that they had a quarrel doesn't mean Mr. Halliwell shot his employer. Let's know just what you

heard, Makin."

"There was nothing more, nothing at all I assure you. And that was most indistinct, sir."

"All right," said Lynch, and waved his hand. "Stay within call, Makin, we might need you. Thanks," he added as an after-thought.

Makin closed the door behind him, and Bristow nodded slowly.

"It looks like Halliwell."

"Yes." Lynch shrugged. "Well, the Press'll be here soon. And those partners. Ring up the Maycourt and see if Halliwell's back yet, will you? I sent King and Arlen to wait for him there, but they were to let him go up to his room and report to the office. Ah—" Lynch smiled gently as the front door bell rang. "The partners, I hope. Now we'll know what's missing."

There were a great many things missing.

Next morning, the *Sun* as well as the other dailies, contained a long account of the Hampstead murder. A list of the stolen jewels and bank-notes appeared, with a photograph of a curly-headed, rather feckless-looking youngster; underneath was the caption:

Brian Halliwell

Halliwell was wanted by the police for questioning in the Hampstead murder case, said the *Wire*. It went on to describe the circumstances of the burglary at the diamond merchant's house, and to show by every inference possible short of libel that Halliwell was wanted for the murder of Matthew Kingley.

Mannerer read several reports as he finished an early breakfast. Time and time again he had thought about the incidents of the previous night. No word from Marion Delray had suggested a double purpose in her visit, while Lorna had assured him that the invitation had come, unprompted, from her mother. Lorna had laughed a little at his insistence, and had finally convinced him that Lady Fauntley was interested in Marion; the rest had been pure chance.

The affair had seemed unlikely to cause him further worry; but now all his misgivings were aroused. There was a connection between the Maycourt robbery and the Kingley murder. The Baron had become involved in the robbery by a newspaper needing a sensation; surely he need not be dragged into the murder?

The Yard, of course, would throw its net far wider with a murder case than with a minor jewel robbery. The mention of the Baron in the Press might bring Bristow to see Mannering, if only as a formality.

Apart from the fact that he might be forced into the affair solely to defend himself, he could not get the memory of Marion Delray's face out of his mind. She would be badly hit by the later case, whether Brian was guilty or not.

If Halliwell was guilty, he had made a thorough job of it. More than four thousand pounds in banknotes had been stolen, with some treasury-notes. In addition three rubies and two diamonds of a total value of thirty-four thousand pounds were missing. Apparently Kingley had recently bought the jewels, and they had been held at his house temporarily. He had been negotiating privately for their sale, and might have needed them at any time during the evening. According to the *Sun*, the police had information to that effect from Mr. Arthur Fells, and Mr. Arnold Graham, the two remaining partners in King-ley's Limited.

Jewels worth more than five thousand pounds apiece were sizeable, if not unusually big; large enough at least to arouse the interest of any man seriously interested in gems. Mannering was beginning to doubt whether young Halliwell would have been fool enough to take such noticeable and easily recognisable stones. On the other hand, if he had made a habit of stealing the company's goods he would have had a safe outlet for resale.

"Hardly likely," said Mannering aloud. "If he pinched the others and had a market, there wouldn't have been a trickle to Levenson; they'd have all gone the same way. If I could find the stones I'd probably get an idea who took them."

He scowled and told himself not to be a fool. The matter was

one for the police, and a pair of blue and appealing eyes was no justification for his interference.

Where was Halliwell?

Bristow and a great many others echoed that question, for Brian Halliwell had not returned to his hotel, and the police had failed to locate him. As far as Mannering knew he might have been found in the past few hours, but if he had deliberately hidden, the search might last some days. The longer he was away the blacker the case would look against him, and it was already fairly strong.

A sharp knock on the door coincided with his last drink of coffee. He was expecting to see Lorna, and she came in quickly.

She was frowning, and Mannering guessed why.

“Hallo, John.” Her kiss was half-hearted, and she looked hard at Mannering. “You’ve heard about this, of course? Halliwell, I mean?”

“Yes, but you’re up early, darling, it’s hardly half-past eight.”

“I’ve heard from Marion, and I had to come over. The poor kid’s frantic. She’s had a violent quarrel with her aunt, and she rushed round to us before we were up. Mrs. Willison’s heard about the advertisement.”

“That was inevitable,” said Mannering. “And Marion—”

“She’s sure Halliwell didn’t do it.”

“Yes,” said Mannering. “She’d hardly think otherwise. But it’s not so certain as that.”

Lorna’s smile was fleeting and disconcerting.

“I’m breaking all the rules, darling, but you could find those stones quicker than the police. Levenson would help. It wouldn’t be dangerous, and if we proved they came from Halliwell—well, that would be that. But if they didn’t, if Halliwell’s innocent, it would haunt me if anything happened to him. I—”

Mannering was thoughtful.

“If I need an excuse for getting busy, it’s here, eh? I’d like to find those stones, but—Anyhow, there’ll be no harm in looking after Marion. If she happens to know where Halliwell is, make her talk. If he’s innocent, he’s taking the surest way of looking guilty I know.”

“And you?”

“I don’t know,” said Mannering fretfully. “Last night I would have said ‘No’ without thinking twice, but it’s beginning to worry me, and—damn it, I *want* to. But I’ve always wanted to, and I’ve told myself often enough the Baron’s finished. Yet a job like this—”

Lorna knew that only caution held him back, that he was already thinking of the chances of working again as the Baron, with a cause to fight for, and reward enough in the thrill of the game. She now wanted him to fight, although earlier she had hoped that he would forget the Baron.

She left him to reach his decision unaided.

Chapter Four

Contacts

When the door closed behind Lorna, Mannering remained motionless in the middle of the room. His lips were parted a little for some seconds and then he laughed as he went to the cocktail cabinet. The electric clock showed exactly nine-thirty when he lifted a mild whisky-and-soda.

“To the Baron,” he said solemnly, and drank it at a stretch.

His decision was made, but he did not feel as happy as he had in the moment of exhilaration when he had turned to the cabinet. There was fascination in working on his own against the police, exhilaration in the memory of past triumphs, and thrills in his narrow shaves with Bristow.

There was, however, a cold realisation of the dangers of failure. To fight for a cause sounded well, but when the cause was not remotely connected with him it lost something of its savour.

There was another vital factor in his decision.

He might be forced into the affair whether he acted or not; he might even find circumstances working against him. If he started at once he would have a chance of getting information to help both Halliwell and himself.

He smiled a little.

There were other things. Old contacts—old friends. It was six months since he had seen most of them, but it seemed six years.

He chuckled again as he filled his cigarette-case, but thoughts and fancies were running through his mind. He saw from the papers that Bristow was working on the Kingley murder. Lynch would be with him. They were the Yard specialists on jewels, and the oldest antagonists of the Baron. If Bristow once suspected the Baron was busy, even in a tentative

fashion, the hunt would be hot and strong for Mannering.

Confound the hunt! Lorna had been right, the best way of finding who had stolen the stuff from Kingley's safe was to discover who sold them, and then trace back. The first contact was Leverson.

The streets were already warm when Mannering walked sharply along Clarges Street. September was doing its best to prove that summer was still in England, although the time was not yet ten o'clock. It was like a breath of the past when he glanced up and down the street automatically, as though Bristow might have put a man to trail him already.

Only a road-sweeper, a milkman and two well-dressed women were in sight.

At the corner, a taxi was returning quickly to the main roads more likely to provide a fare, and Mannering raised a hand. The cab swerved in, brakes squealing.

"Aldgate Station," said Mannering.

"Right y'are, sir."

Piccadilly, the Circus, side streets into High Holborn, Cheapside, the Bank, Fenchurch Street and Aldgate Pump. The Baron had ridden that route a dozen times with stolen gems in his pocket and the fear of the police on his heels. He was smiling reflectively when they reached the station, and he presented the cabby with an extra half-a-crown. The man tossed and caught it.

"*Many* thanks, sir. Can I wait?"

"I may be an hour."

"I'll pull in be'ind the others on the rank, sir, and 'ave a look at the runners in the three-thirty."

Mannering nodded, but he could not help wondering whether there was any motive in the cabby's consideration. It was hardly likely, but the instinct of the Baron was now alive in him, watchful and suspicious of everything slightly unusual. He turned sharply down by the station, towards Wine Street. Flick Leverson lived in that quiet side road, in a house out of keeping with the rest of the neighbourhood. Leverson was hedged in by two doctors who doubtless believed their neighbour, reputedly

a specialist in antiques, was as blameless as themselves. Mannering had always walked from the station in the past, and he wanted to relive the past that morning.

A white-capped head showed for a moment at Leverson's downstairs window. Before he had knocked on the door a maid opened it, smart, smiling, obviously pleased.

"Good morning, sir."

"Hallo, Janet." Mannering shook hands. "You keeping well?"

"Yes, thanks. It's a long time since you've been here, Mr. Mannering."

"I'm reformed," said the Baron, and Janet smiled more widely. There had been a time when only Janet had stood between the Baron and the police: Janet had won.

She opened the first door leading from the narrow hall, and announced him. Mannering entered a low-ceilinged and pleasant room, filled with bric-a-brac of exceptional value. It represented an assortment of periods, but the Chippendales and the Sheratons were genuine, and there were old Dresden and Sevres pieces on the walls. The windows were open, but a small fire burned in the grate. Leverson always burned a coal fire.

He stretched his right hand out, gripping Mannering's warmly. The left arm hung stiffly at his side: it was artificial, Mannering knew, a reminder of Flanders in 1916.

Leverson was a big man, if smaller than the Baron. His hair was getting more white than grey, his fresh face, with the pleasant, blunted features, seemed to have grown appreciably older in the past six months. The years showed more on Leverson than the Baron.

"Well, Mannering, it's good to see you again, but I half expected it after your call yesterday. The same connection?" He offered cigars and cigarettes as he spoke, and Mannering selected one of the latter.

"Too early for heavier stuff, Flick, thanks. Yes, it's the same connection. It's deepened, though, the Kingley murder's part of it now."

Leverson frowned.

"What fools men are, Mannering. Kill—kill—kill. And there's

no purpose in it—Kingley didn't put up any kind of fight apparently. Shot from behind—the man could easily have knocked him out. Or used your old friend, ether-gas, if he could get it. He'd find something similar, anyhow. Are you starting again?"

"I don't know," said Mannering. "If I were wise I'd keep well away, but there's a big hunt for this fellow Halliwell, starting from the advertisement." Leverson leaned back, a finger crooked and tattooing on the arm of his chair. Janet tapped on the door as Mannering finished. As she brought in coffee and biscuits, Leverson spoke as though she was not present.

"So you don't think it was Halliwell?"

"I think it's open to doubt, and I want to trace the stones. And I'd like to find out if there's a link-up between the three jobs."

"Three?"

"The Maycourt, last night's Elan robbery, and Kingley's."

"What makes you think it's the Elan?"

"I don't, but when hotel robberies go in pairs, there's always a chance they're connected. Bristow took this fellow Loffatt—do you know him?"

Leverson spoke decisively.

"Loffatt's a good man with his fingers and tools, but he's not capable of tackling a job at the Elan on his own."

"So someone's working him?"

"There's no doubt of it."

"The same someone might have been behind the Maycourt theft?"

"Ye-es." Leverson rubbed his cheek slowly. "But I wonder why you say that? The two jobs were different, Mannering. The only similarity is the fact that they were at hotels. And it's an even longer stretch to associate the Maycourt job with last night's Hampstead affair. The methods were entirely different."

Mannering nodded, for Leverson, as well as the police, could categorise different burglaries with uncanny accuracy. It was possible for them to name the likely man in four out of five jobs, and to be right nine times in ten.

“They’re different, but Kingley’s are affected both times—and so is young Halliwell.”

“That’s right enough,” said Leverson. “If Halliwell did them both—but that’s not what you want to find.”

“I’ve no objection to finding it,” said Mannering, “providing I can really be sure. Well now, the Kingley stuff might reach you. Usually you’d turn it down, of course” – Flick Leverson had certain strict rules, and he never bought stones where murder had been committed in the theft: it was not so much fear of being arrested as an accessory after the fact as a strict code against murder – “but this time—well?”

“I can hold it, or have it held,” said Leverson. “And I’ll put a feeler or two out. Rummell’s off his ticket, by the way, and he’ll start working at once. He might get them. Shall I speak to him?”

“If you will.” Mannering knew that next to Leverson, Rummell was the biggest jewel fence in London. Rummell had none of the scruples of the other man, but in his way he was fair-dealing. He had just finished his ticket-of-leave period after a three-year sentence for receiving, but he would take up the threads again as though he had returned from a pleasure cruise.

“Right,” said Leverson, and then added thoughtfully: “I suppose there’s nothing at Halliwell’s room to show one way or the other?”

Mannering frowned.

“I haven’t been. The police must have looked over it by now, and I don’t think they’d miss much, for or against Halliwell.”

“That’s likely,” admitted Leverson. “But they might leave it pretty well as it is, hoping Halliwell will go back for the stuff. And they might not put the same construction as you on anything they find. But confound it, I’m suggesting you go to the Maycourt when the police will have the place sealed up! You’ve a devilish persuasive manner, John.”

Mannering tapped a cigarette on his case thoughtfully.

“So have you. A look at Halliwell’s rooms might be instructive if I can get there before the police have cleaned it right out—it might even help if they’ve been through it properly. I’ve known them miss some pretty obvious hiding-

places.” He laughed softly. “It’s a poor-class place for the Baron, but just on an errand of inquiry, I think it’s worth while.”

“Shall I phone you later or will you call me?” asked Leverson. “I’m half-wishing I hadn’t suggested—”

“Fiddlesticks!” retorted the Baron. “It’s just what I wanted. I’d better give you a call from a kiosk, in case Bristow’s on the watch.”

Ten minutes later he bought an early evening paper, and found a cab. The man who had brought him was not on the rank, and his suspicions in that quarter seemed unfounded.

There was a column about the murder, but no reference to an arrest. Nor was there any word that the police had visited the Maycourt Hotel. Mannering was inclining more to the theory that the authorities were setting a trap in the hope that Halliwell would return. That would make the Baron’s task more difficult, but the police would hardly be expecting a visit from a cracksman of his experience.

He collected a small kit of tools – all normal car or household items that anyone might possess – and a small make-up box before leaving Clarges Street for Waterloo. From the cloakroom at the station he collected a small case containing a rope ladder, and in another cloakroom he wound the ladder about his waist and then used the grease-paint to alter the lines at his mouth, chin and eyes, and rubber cheek-pads that made him look much fuller-faced than John Mannering. No one would have recognised him without a close scrutiny.

If by chance he was caught he would pretend an exceptional personal interest, and whatever went wrong, there would be nothing to connect him with the Baron. The fact that the police would be on guard gave a savour to the attempt, a breath of the past again. It was possible that he would find enough evidence at the Maycourt to judge whether Halliwell was worth further effort, even if he found nothing definite about the murder.

What was more important, however, was that Mannering would satisfy the craving for action that he had felt and yet repressed from the moment he had read the ‘agony’ appeal. That had struck a deep chord in him which would not be

silenced, hard though he tried. He told himself grimly that the job ahead would show him whether he was being a fool, or whether by backing himself against the police he could find some measure of satisfaction. If he found an answer to that problem, the risk would be worth while.

Then he forgot everything but the task of getting into Halliwell's room under the eyes of the police.

The Maycourt Hotel was in Bray Crescent, a turning that ran parallel with the Bayswater Road. The long series of terraced houses, four and five stories high, looked drab and yet were imposing enough to suggest occupation by people of comfortable means. The keynote of the district was respectability, and the Maycourt was no exception.

Only a single sign, in discreet letters bracketed to the wall and stretching across three houses, advertised the fact that it was a hotel and not a private residence. Through the glass doors Mannering could see the reception desk, a uniformed porter and an imposing array of palms.

The porter came to the door as Mannering appeared, and took the case with a quiet: "Allow me, sir." A middle-aged woman at the desk was pleasant and helpful. He booked a room for one night only, and as he signed as Julian Morgan, keeping to his own initials, he looked for Halliwell's signature in the register.

Halliwell had been in Room 32. Mannering's was 53, and that suggested he would be reasonably near his objective. His heart turned over when he saw that he was on the same floor, and that the two rooms adjoining 32 had their doors slightly open. Were the police using them? The porter broke across his thoughts. "Is there anything you need at the moment, sir?"

"I'd like some coffee," said Mannering, "and an early lunch. You start at twelve?"

"Twelve-thirty, sir, but it can be arranged any time, if—"

"Twelve-thirty will do me," smiled Mannering, and the porter went out. Mannering lit a cigarette, and left the room immediately afterwards.

He slipped back along the corridor. There was one turn, to the left, between his room and that which Halliwell had occupied. Halliwell's door was closed tightly, but Mannering did not try the handle, although he was listening intently. He heard the slightest rustle of movement in Room 33, and his conviction that the police were there grew stronger.

The bathrooms were further along the corridor, and to reach them he had to pass his objective. It would be easy to approach.

By the time Mannering had finished the reconnoitre and was in the room again, a trim-looking middle-aged maid arrived with coffee and biscuits.

"Thanks," said Mannering, and as the woman turned he laughed. "I've just remembered that you've been in the newspapers here lately. I—"

"It's been *dreadful*, sir!" Obviously it was a popular topic, for the woman's eyes shone. "What with newspaper gentleman and police and gentlemen from the insurance companies poor Mrs. Watson hasn't known *what* to do. And such a respectable hotel, sir, Mrs. Watson's never had a *breath* of scandal before, and we've been rushed off our feet, that we have, sir!"

"Well, the police aren't likely to worry you much now," said Mannering, pouring out coffee.

"*That* they wi—" began the maid, but she stopped abruptly. "It's to be *hoped* not, sir." She turned colour, and hurried out of the room. Obviously she had had orders not to talk of the police who were on the premises.

"It's working very well indeed," Mannering soliloquised. "Almost too well. I wonder what the windows are like?"

His own room looked into Bray Crescent, and Halliwell's room over the small garden of the hotel. He could not get directly from one window to the other.

It took him ten minutes to discover that the rooms on the floor above were identical in lay-out with his own, and above Halliwell's apartment was Room 72. Its door was open, and a maid was stripping the bed. Mannering tripped deliberately over a mat, and the woman dropped a pillow and came towards him.

“Hurt yourself, sorr?”

“No, I’m all right.” Mannering smiled ruefully as he picked himself up, managing to get just inside the room. There was no luggage that he could see. “I suppose they keep you busy?”

“And glad I am it is so!” The maid nodded an untidy red bead vigorously. “Only five rooms in the hotel empty, sorr, an’ this one booked again from tomorrow night. ’Tis not me who worries about working!”

“I can see that,” smiled Mannering. “But I seem to have got to the wrong floor—room fifty-three—”

“The floor below indade, sorr. Along thayer an’ take the stairs, or the lift is a little further along, sorr.”

Mannering escaped, more satisfied than ever with his discoveries. In a full hotel there would be the constant passing to and fro of residents, and he would not be particularly noticeable. The doors were fitted with easy locks, and it would take him only a few seconds to get into the room above Halliwell’s.

He did not want to wait until the evening, and his opportunity would come between one o’clock and two, the main luncheon hour. He telephoned the desk for lunch at twelve-fifteen, and then settled down to work out the details.

Before going to the dining-room he studied the back of the hotel from a bathroom. He found that he looked out on the backs of a row of shops. Some floors seemed furnished as living quarters, but most of them appeared to be store-rooms, judging from dirty and curtainless windows. The small gardens at the back of the hotel offered little danger; few people strolling in them would think of looking up.

He was aching with impatience to get busy, and when he saw a youthful, alert-looking man enter the dining-room just before one o’clock, his impatience increased. He recognised a Yard man named Ward, and he was reasonably certain that Ward was watching from one of the rooms next to Halliwell’s.

There would be another man on duty, of course, but he need face only one instead of two during that crucial hour.

When he went back, Room 31 was closed: 33 was still open.

Mannerling decided on the instant to take a chance. It was always wise to know his opposition.

He went into the room quickly, and closed the door behind him. Not until it was shut did he appear to see a man sitting on a chair by the bed. His heart seemed to turn over, for he recognised Detective-Sergeant Tanker Tring, Bristow's regular assistant.

"I—I *beg* your pardon!" He altered his voice so that there was no chance of Tring recognising it, but he was feeling hot and cold. "I must have taken the wrong room, unless you—"

"You're wrong, sir," said Tring, in his habitual matter-of-fact and rather gloomy way. He eyed Mannerling without any evidence of recognition or suspicion. Mannerling kept up his part to the life.

"But I could have sworn—fifty-three—"

"*Thirty-three*," said Tring sorrowfully.

"Oh, good Lord!" exclaimed Mannerling. "I really am sorry, sir, I—"

"That's all right," said Tring, and leaned back in his chair.

Mannerling was sure that he had not been recognised, and that was reassuring evidence of the quality of his disguise, but he was hot when he got outside and went up to Room 72.

There was no sound as he bent over the lock, after trying the handle. He held a pick-lock and thin cotton gloves to prevent fingerprints. There was a thrill through his veins as metal touched metal. The first escapade of the Baron for over six months had started.

He had not lost his touch. The lock eased back quickly, and he heard it click. He turned the handle and opened the door; but before getting inside he heard footsteps at the end of the passage.

A single glance to his right showed an oldish woman leaning heavily on a stick. Mannerling went into the room, leaving the door ajar, and the woman hobbled past. He heard a door close further along. He was sweating freely, after the sudden alarm, but he went straight to the window. He pushed it up slowly; it squeaked once or twice, enough to make his pulse race faster.

Leaning out, he could see the wide sill of Halliwell's room below. It was a matter of seconds to unwind a thin rope ladder from his waist, hook it on the window ledge inside and let it fall. It dangled just as far as Halliwell's sill.

Mannering swung himself through the window.

The danger would be most acute for the few seconds that he would be on the ladder, but he went down sure-footed. The rope swayed but gave him no serious trouble, and he was outside Halliwell's window ten seconds after he had left Room 72.

He breathed more easily when he saw that the room was empty.

Every thought was gone from his mind but the task at hand. He looked through the window, and there seemed nothing unusual inside. An open case was on the bed, with its contents tumbled. The window was closed, and the catch was down.

Crouching on the window-sill, Mannering used a thin-bladed screwdriver, forcing it through the join of the windows and scratching at the catch. The seconds seemed like minutes as he levered it upwards, and all the time he was glancing at the door.

Less than ten yards away Tring was leaning back in an easy chair, ready to move at any sound from Room 32.

Nothing happened to alarm the Baron.

The catch went back, and the *click* sounded very clearly while the glass of the window shook a little. He paused, waiting tensely, but no sound came.

He began to raise the window.

He gritted his teeth as he pushed, waiting almost desperately for a loud squeak. Inch by inch he opened it; a foot; then eighteen inches.

There was room to squeeze through, and he decided to wait no longer. He wanted at least ten minutes for a search, and every second counted.

There was no sound at all as he climbed through and stepped silently to the door. It was locked; no one would be able to take him by surprise: the only place he had to watch was the

window.

Then he started to work.

Halliwell had left two suits and an assortment of odds and ends in the room, which was evidence enough that he had not premeditated flight. Mannering looked through the pockets quickly. There were a few letters—two from Marion Delray, one from Kingley's, and several personal notes, but none with any bearing on Halliwell's recent activities.

Mannering started to go through the drawers and the wardrobe. He had never worked faster, the only seconds he lost were in making sure he made no noise.

As he worked he grew more convinced that he would find nothing. The fitted carpet showed no signs of being recently disturbed, the bricks at the fireplace seemed firm and sound, and he could find no false partitions in any of the furniture.

He came last to the double wooden bedstead, and he stripped it quickly. The wood of the spring mattress was bound round in places, as though to prevent the overlay from rubbing.

Mannering tore off the bindings. These revealed only the bare wood, and he was telling himself that the effort had been wasted.

Then the fourth binding came off, and he saw the wood had been recently cut in the bed. With heightening excitement, he prised at it with the screwdriver. A piece nearly a foot long came up slowly, and Mannering's fingers were unsteady as he started to explore the cavity he had revealed.

Chapter Five

Contradictory Evidence

In the moment of finding the cavity, Mannering forgot the dangers under which he was working. He had set out to find whether Halliwell was implicated, and now it seemed probable that he had succeeded.

He did not hear the sound at the door as he searched the hole.

His fingers rubbed only against rough wood, and he took a torch from his pocket and shone it inside. Nothing was there. The hiding-place might have been used by Halliwell, or by any other occupant of the room, and it proved nothing.

Mannering forced back his disappointment as he re-bound the bedstead, and then straightened up to replace the clothes, anxious to leave the room without a trace of his presence.

As he stood up, he saw the door-handle turning. For a moment he felt panic.

The turning stopped. Mannering heard a faint scratching at the door, much as he would have made himself had he been trying to force an entry. For the first time it occurred to him that it was not the police outside, but it made no vital difference to his actions. He made for the window, and squeezed through the gap. Crouching on the sill he pushed the window down, slowly and noiselessly. All the time he was watching the door.

It was still closed when he had the window shut. He used the screwdriver again, to get the catch back, still trying to make sure his way of entry was not discovered.

The catch went back.

Mannering straightened up, taking hold of the rope-ladder. As he did so he moved aside, so that he could see into the room without being seen. The door began to open slowly, and he saw

a man enter. The lower part of his face was covered in a white handkerchief.

Was it Halliwell?

Mannering saw him close the door and go towards the bed. He reached the hidden cavity.

And then out of the corner of his eyes Mannering saw two people standing and staring in the garden of the hotel.

Mannering swung up the rope-ladder as fast as he had ever moved in his life. He had been desperately anxious to see the intruder's reaction on finding the hiding-place empty, but the danger was acute. The seconds seemed unending before he reached Room 72, and climbed through, expecting an alarm at any moment. He left the window, unhooked the rope-ladder and stuffed it under his coat as he went towards the door.

There was no one outside.

He stepped into the passage, closed the door, and then sped towards the staircase. As he reached it he heard voices, high-pitched, and excited, travelling up the lift-shaft nearby.

The alarm was on!

Mannering took to the stairs, reaching the next floor and hurrying towards his own room.

Halfway along the passage he came face to face with Sergeant Tring. Mannering's heart seemed to stop, but Tring looked at him and past him, before going on. No sound came from Halliwell's room, but the man with the white handkerchief was probably still there, unaware of the alarm.

Mannering reached his own room, stuffed the ladder back in his case with the tools, and locked it. He was in the room less than four minutes, but as he went out he heard voices closer at hand, and a thumping at a door. As he turned the corner he saw Tring and Ward, with two or three other men outside Halliwell's door. Ward was barging at it with his shoulder. There was a loud creak and then a crash as the door tumbled inwards, Ward falling forward with it.

Mannering was in time to catch a glimpse of the man with the handkerchief mask, dropping from the window. Ward had lost his balance. Tring went inwards blindly, stumbled against

his colleague, and fell down with a thud. The face at the window had disappeared.

Mannering went past trying to appear unconcerned, using the stairs and not the lift. Neither the porter nor the woman at the desk were in sight. He put a pound note under a telephone, and then left the hotel. Every moment he was afraid that someone would shout after him, but he reached the end of the road, and rounded the corner.

He could now see the back of the Maycourt.

A rope was dangling from Halliwell's window. Ward, clearly outlined against the window, started to climb down it, and at the same moment Mannering saw a man poised on top of the far wall of the hotel garden. He was there only for a moment, and Mannering gained no clear impression before the figure disappeared.

The only question in Mannering's mind was the identity of the second burglar; if it had been Halliwell, the Baron was out of the chase.

Just thirty minutes afterwards, Detective-Sergeant Tring and Detective Ward, of Scotland Yard, were facing Chief-Inspector Bristow. Tring was speaking.

"I thought I heard a disturbance along the corridor, sir, and I went to investigate. I made sure that Halliwell's door was locked. At the end of the passage I found an old wo—lady, sir, who'd broken the stick she walked with. She wanted to get downstairs, and I helped her, sir. I wasn't away more than four minutes."

"And in that four minutes," snapped Bristow, "someone, probably Halliwell, got into the room—"

"He wouldn't have had time to do anything, sir. The alarm was raised too soon."

"He had time to strip the bed and get away," growled Bristow. "I put two men on to wait for this, and you make a hash of it. You hadn't searched the bed before, had you?"

"No, sir. We left it, on instructions—"

"All right, all right," said Bristow testily. Angered though he

was by the development, and convinced that Halliwell had almost fallen into the trap, he knew that Tring had been the victim of a carefully planned burglary. "Get downstairs and see if you can trace the woman with the stick. She's probably gone, too," he added bitterly. "Ward, take the bindings off that bed."

By the time Tring had discovered that the woman was missing, and realised how completely he had been duped, Bristow had found the cavity: and John Mannering was in the cloakroom at Bayswater Road station, getting rid of the grease-paint and the cheek pads.

He was still jittery. It had been a closer shave than he had expected, but it had been made worse by the fact that someone else had been inspired by the same idea, and had chosen the lunch-hour period. It seemed all odds on the man in the handkerchief being Halliwell. The idiocy of such an attempt to return seemed to make contradictory evidence, but perhaps Halliwell had worked with someone else.

The only possible reason for a return would be to get at jewels or money. Mannering was virtually certain that the room hid nothing. That left open another remote possibility: that someone else had been to the room before the man in the mask.

"But damn it," muttered Mannering to himself, "Tring's not sleepy enough to let them make a habit of it. How the devil did anyone get in through the door at all? Why was Tring in the passage and not his room?"

He felt worried as he reached Clarges Street, and took a quick bath to get rid of the last traces of grease-paint. Then he made a parcel of his tools, and addressed it to an accommodation address where he would call for it later if he needed it.

Just an hour after he had reached Clarges Street he took a cab for Portland Place.

The Cab pulled up behind a car standing outside the Fauntley house. Mannering paid his man off, turned, and then stopped in the middle of a step. In that moment the whole of his world seemed topsy-turvy, but only a few tradesmen and the cabby were there to see his momentary pause.

He would have recognised the car in a thousand; it was Chief-Inspector Bristow's red and black Morris Ten.

Mannering walked slowly towards the steps of the house. Two minutes before he would have heard the twittering of the sparrows in the small shrubbery, felt the cooling breath of a light wind. Now it was concerned with only one thought: Bristow was here.

Mason opened the door promptly, as though he had been in the hall.

"Good morning, sir. Miss Lorna is in the drawing-room."

"Alone?"

"No, sir. With Miss Delray and—a gentleman from the police, sir."

Mannering nodded and passed over his hat and stick. For a moment he was tempted to call himself a fool. Of course, Bristow had come to see the girl, and it was pure chance that he had chosen this time of the day. Even Bristow would not be crazy enough to suspect the Baron was busy because the unofficial fiancée of a wanted man had visited Portland Place.

It was bringing the affair close home, however, and he would have an opportunity of crossing swords with the Yard man again. His confidence returned.

He stopped as he reached the door.

"How long has the Inspector been here, Mason?"

Mason frowned.

"Perhaps six minutes, sir? Miss Lorna has only just gone in to see him."

"Good," said Mannering, and Mason announced him.

Lorna was standing by the window, behind Marion Delray's chair. Bristow was in front of the younger girl, spruce and upright. He was frowning a little, probably because Mannering had arrived; Bristow rarely welcomed John Mannering.

Marion no longer looked barely out of school. It might have been that a brown tweed skirt and cream blouse made her look older, but that could hardly explain the serious expression in her blue eyes. She looked composed yet worried and

determined; her eyes lighted up when Mannering entered.

“Don’t get up,” said Mannering, smiling at her.

“Morning, Lorna. Hallo, Bristow, what’s brought you here?”

Bristow fingered his tie.

“A matter of business, Mr. Mannering.” When strangers were near he was punctilious in his mode of address, a fact Mannering had always appreciated. “I would like a few words with Miss Delray—alone.”

Bristow covered his inward annoyance as he spoke. He had spent some time finding Marion Delray, and the last thing he had wanted was to meet Mannering with her.

Mannering offered cigarettes, and when two were alight – neither woman accepted – he sat down in a chair opposite Marion. He was frowning a little, but he settled himself as if for a long spell.

“Is that ‘alone’ necessary, old man?”

He saw the flash of irritation in Bristow’s eyes, but he had no intention of letting the Inspector talk with Marion by herself. The police had discovered her engagement to Halliwell, of course, and Bristow was here to get all the information he could. Mannering had no liking for the interrogation of the girl in the circumstances; and he had a particular anxiety to prevent Bristow from learning the Baron’s part in the affair.

Bristow withdrew as gracefully as he could, and proved to Mannering’s satisfaction that there was nothing serious about the inquiry.

“Oh, I can waive it. Now, Miss Delray, you tell me that you last saw Mr. Halliwell yesterday morning, and that he was leaving for Cornwall. That’s right?”

“Yes.” Marion’s voice was steady enough.

“You know now that he didn’t go to Cornwall?”

“You tell me so,” said Marion, and Mannering secretly applauded. Bristow smoothed his moustache.

“It’s true, I assure you. He was at his hotel from twelve o’clock until five, when he left. He was seen at Gray’s Road, Hampstead, at nine-fifteen, and he was somewhere between those times. You’re sure you didn’t see him?”

"I saw him yesterday morning at eleven o'clock, and I haven't seen or heard from him since," said Marion quietly.

"Thank you. Now, Miss Delray, it's important that we get in touch with him quickly. He has to answer a few questions, and the quicker the points are cleared up the better it will be for all concerned. Can you tell me of any place where he might have gone?"

Marion's eyes were wide and candid.

"No, Inspector. He has no regular home, and he always writes to me from various hotels. His father lives in a Bournemouth boarding house, but perhaps you know that."

Bristow nodded slowly. He was coming to the conclusion that it would be impossible to get a line on Halliwell from the girl. Probably it would have made no difference had Mannering not arrived, but he was anxious to know whether Mannering was in the affair at all. He cropped up too frequently.

Bristow was reasonably sure that Mannering was not concerned in the murder. He might have committed the robbery, and Kingley could have been killed by Halliwell subsequently. That was a possibility, but not one in which Bristow believed.

Mannering knew it would pass through Bristow's mind, and broke in gently with information that he had been at Portland Place between eight o'clock and eleven, with Lorna, Marion Delray, Lady Fauntley and Mrs. Willison. That knocked Bristow's tentative theory on the head. He satisfied himself with extracting a promise that the girl would tell him immediately if she heard from Halliwell, and moved towards the door.

"I'll show you out." Mannering followed him, the door closed behind them, and they faced each other in the passage. Bristow looked austere.

"Mannering, I hope you haven't started again."

"I never did start," said Mannering promptly, "and I doubt whether the Baron's connected with this affair. But I'm rather fond of that girl, Bill. She's a friend of Lorna's and I'd like to see her happier. What's Halliwell's position?"

Bristow rubbed his moustache thoughtfully.

“I wouldn’t give much for his chances. Three thousand pounds in bank notes, all notes stolen from Kingley’s safe, were found in his room at the Maycourt this afternoon, in a cavity drilled in a wooden bed-post. So were the jewels he said had been stolen from him, apart from one or two. This was with them, but I didn’t need to show it to the girl after she admitted her engagement.”

Bristow slipped his fingers into his waistcoat pocket, and drew out a small ring-case. A moment later a solitaire ring glinted in the sun streaming through the hall windows.

Chapter Six

Action

Mannering looked at the ring thoughtfully. The advertisement had claimed it to be worth fifty pounds. He doubted whether it would have been sold for more than thirty pounds by any jeweller. As the Baron he had played with single jewels worth a hundred times its value, and yet that solitaire was the point of contact between him and the affair of the murdered diamond merchant.

That was insignificant, however, against the evidence the ring provided.

With a good proportion of the loot from Kingley's house, it had been found in a bed-rail hiding-place that Mannering knew had been empty two hours before. The man in the handkerchief must have put the stuff there, and that was reasonable proof that the intruder had not been Halliwell. Halliwell would never have been such a fool as to go back to replace evidence almost strong enough to convict him of a part in the murder.

The stolen valuables had been deliberately planted in that room to ensure that Halliwell would be held responsible for their theft. That was all the justification the Baron needed for playing his part, and he felt more satisfied.

"Thanks, Bill." He gave nothing away as he spoke. "You've told the girl nothing?"

Bristow was a little too formal, as he always was when caught out in an act that might have been called sentimental.

"I saw no need, Mannering. The evening papers will probably have the full story, as Superintendent Lynch wants the Press to help in the search for Halliwell. However—"

Mannering gripped the Inspector's arm.

"You're a soft-hearted old devil, Bill. But for all that, I shall

probably have to break the news gently. So three-quarters of the cash and the smaller jewels have turned up, eh? You'll get a pretty strong case now."

Bristow nodded. He had no objection to discussing this case with Mannering.

"Unbreakable, I think. Halliwell was there all right. Finger-prints would have proved it even if the butler hadn't been able to testify. There was a quarrel. Motive's strong enough, particularly as Halliwell was in a foul temper—motive apart from the stuff taken, of course."

"Found the gun?" asked Mannering.

"No-o. But we will, when we've got Halliwell."

"Not much doubt generally then?"

"I can't see even Hackett pleading a case for Halliwell on the evidence," said Bristow. "Of course there are things to be filled in yet, but an attempt was made to get at the stuff at the Maycourt. The man got away, but—"

"So Halliwell left three thousand pounds and some jewellery in the one place where it would be found and used as evidence against him," said Mannering dryly. "If you're looking on that as a decisive factor, Bill, I shouldn't be too sure about Mortimer Hackett, K.C." He chuckled, and lifted a hand with one finger pointed at Bristow's head. "Gentlemen! Gentlemen of the jury! The accused is a man of intelligence, proved beyond all question of doubt. This crime, on the statement of the prosecution, has been carried out by a man little more than a fool. A fool, gentlemen—is the prisoner a *fool*? Look at him—remember his reputation, his record. One of unblemished character, a character still without a stain. Would that man, gentlemen, have gone back to his hotel, deposited part—I say *part*—of the ill-gotten gains, the money taken at the price of a man's life, money that could only lead to the gallows, would that man have committed an act of such incredible idiocy? But I am insulting you, gentlemen, by suggesting that you might consider it for a moment. *He—did—not!* Someone else, the man or woman whom the police have so signally failed to find, put the money and the stones where they were found—Bill, Hackett

would make hay of you.”

Bristow was scowling, made doubtful against his will.

“That’s as it stands at the moment, Mannering, but there’ll be an explanation. Halliwell doesn’t seem too bright to me, so far, or he would never have gone back for the stuff.”

“Please yourself,” said Mannering. “It looks to me as though he’s been put up for you to shoot at, while someone else gets away with the job. It’s too obvious, Bill.”

But the words hardly sounded convincing. It was Bristow’s short, derisive laugh that stiffened him against a growing doubt. He *wanted* to believe Halliwell innocent.

“Not everyone’s as tortuous as you, Mannering.”

“Nor everyone as naive as our Bill Bristow, eh?”

Bristow scowled, and turned to the door.

“You’ll see. By the way, we had a visit from Halliwell’s father this morning. Badly cut up. Er—”

“I’ll see him,” said Mannering quickly. “Hardly able to stand the expense of a trial, is he?”

“Not without realising his capital. Well, I must be going.”

Mannering let the Inspector out, and went back slowly to the drawing-room. Bristow had expressed his complete faith in the identity of the murderer, and almost in the same breath put in a plea for the father. Yes, Bill Bristow was a good sort. Mannering wished he could be on the same side, but whatever happened eventually, Bristow and the Baron must be antagonists at this stage.

The planting of concrete evidence at Halliwell’s room convinced him that there was more to the affair than met the eye. With a ready-made victim on their hands, motive, probable intent, and a missing suspect, the police would hardly be expected to look further until Halliwell had been interrogated. If, afterwards, there were reasonable grounds for doubt as to his guilt they would have to continue their investigation; but Mannering wondered whether the grounds would appear to them as reasonable. Halliwell had damned himself by disappearing.

Had he disappeared willingly?

That thought opened out a new prospect, and Mannering was beginning to feel the rising of excitement, a zest for the fray. That it was different from his other brushes with the law was an advantage.

Marion jumped up from her chair as he returned to the drawing-room.

“Has he gone? Did he—”

“Take it easy,” smiled Mannering, dropping into a chair and smiling at her. Her blue eyes were wide, and for a moment she was the child of the previous night again. “I wish your Brian had had the good sense not to run away, Marion.”

“But I’m sure there’s a reason for it!”

Mannering did not emphasise the apparent explanation.

“Yes, but we’ve got to find him. Do you know of anyone with a good reason for wanting him in trouble?”

“Good heavens, no! I—” she broke off. “I didn’t know his friends well, of course. He may have had. Mr. Mannering, you don’t think—”

“As we’re likely to be working a lot together,” smiled Mannering, “we’ll make it John, it’s easier to say. I think someone is deliberately trying to cause trouble for your Brian. The latest developments make it clearer. Some of the stuff—including your ring and some of the bank notes—have been found at Maycourt. Only a fool would have left it there.”

He stopped.

The news was broken, as easily as he could do it, and for a few seconds there was silence in the drawing-room. Marion’s lips closed tightly, and she was breathing heavily. He saw an expression almost of horror in her eyes. When she spoke it was in a whisper.

“Oh, dear God! They found it there. It—it will finish him. I —”

“Don’t jump to conclusions,” said Lorna, getting up and sitting on a pouffe near the girl. “Leave that to the police and the papers. You believe in Brian, don’t you?”

“I do.” The girl’s voice was louder and defiant.

“So do we,” said Mannering cheerfully. “This is a discovery

that will help more than injure him, once we get to the truth of it. Cheer up, my dear, cheer up!"

Marion was fighting to keep back the tears.

"It's—it's so difficult. I don't know what I'd have done without you and Lorna."

"You don't have to. You've no idea where Brian might be, of course?" Mannering kept hammering at that point, but he believed she had told the truth.

"None." Marion gulped a little and forced a smile. She fumbled with the box of cigarettes near her, and Lorna struck a match. "Supposing he gets in touch with me, what do I do?"

"Find me at once," said Mannering. "I—"

He broke off, as the telephone rang. Lorna picked it up, and he saw from her sudden frown that it was no one she wanted to hear. The voice at the other end was coming loudly through the microphone, and Lorna held the receiver away from her ear.

"Not quite so loud, please." She covered the mouthpiece and turned to Mannering. "It's Mrs. Willison. Mr. Halliwell's there, and she wants Marion at once."

"Tell her Marion's prostrate, and will they come round?" Lorna nodded, and as the cackling from the earpiece finished she spoke convincingly. There were one or two further cackles, evidence of argument, before Lorna said: "In twenty minutes, then." She closed down, and turned to Marion. "Will you see her?"

"I suppose I'd better."

"How old are you?" asked Mannering easily. "How old?" The girl looked startled. "Twenty-one-and-a-bit. Why?"

Mannering smiled. Here was a chance to restore her confidence.

"Then you needn't see her if you don't want to, and she can't do a thing to force you. It's not important. I somehow can't imagine your aunt being helpful at the moment."

"She'll be hateful," said Marion Delray slowly, "but I can manage her. Did she say Peter would be coming?" The question was for Lorna. "No. Who's Peter?"

"Her son. Adopted son, really. He's about the only thing

that's made Aunt Gertrude bearable lately; you'll like him. Perhaps," she added, turning to Mannering, "you'll know him."

"Peter who?"

"Lake. You know, the motorist—"

"I should say I do know Peter," said Mannering, and he felt suddenly much more cheerful. "I didn't know he was in London. Hasn't he been to the Berlin rally?"

"Yes, he got back last night. I hope he doesn't try to persuade me to go back. I don't think I can stand it."

"Leave Peter to me," said Mannering with confidence. It was little more than a quarter of an hour later when the callers arrived. Mrs. Willison, angular and more sour-faced, forcibly expressed her disapproval, and Mannering hoped Lady Fauntley would return quickly from her shopping expedition. Halliwell's father, and Peter Lake, were different propositions. It was a difficult meeting, but Mannering played the part of host, and Lorna started to do her best with the older woman.

Lake, who was one of those shortish, very broad men, with heavily-packed shoulders, kept a serious face with difficulty. He had close-cut, thick hair that would stand up abruptly, a fresh-coloured and somewhat pugnacious face, with a scar on the nose and right cheek that was plain but did not disfigure him. It was a relic of a crash in the Monte Carlo rally of three years before. Lake had taken third place after driving two hundred miles when he should have been in hospital, and the performance had captured the popular fancy. His hands were spotless, but the nails were broken in places, a sure sign of a motorist who was not beyond doing his own share of the mechanic's work.

James Halliwell was a different type altogether, apart from his age.

There was an intangible air of the sea about him. He was bearded, and his skin was rough and inclined to be coarse. Behind steelrimmed glasses his grey eyes were anxious and apprehensive. He covered his anxiety well, the only sign of nervous tension being the way he played with a button of his coat.

The introductions were hardly over when Lady Fauntley bustled in, flushed and a little breathless.

“Good morning, all; I do hope I haven’t kept anyone waiting. Why, Gertrude, I hardly expected to see *you* this morning; I was coming over this afternoon, a little chat about Marion *did* seem wise; these young people are so difficult, aren’t they? So headstrong.” She broke off, panting and smiling. “Oh dear, I can see I’ll have to go on a diet again, Gertrude—”

She sat down close to Mrs. Willison, and Peter Lake’s eyes twinkled. Mannering turned to James Halliwell with relief. Lady Fauntley would keep Gertrude busy until the essentials were over.

Marion kept her voice low.

“You’ve heard about—Brian and me, Mr. Halliwell?”

The old man nodded, the button twisting furiously.

“From the police. Brian—Brian told me there was someone, I had no idea who. I only wish we had met in—in happier circumstances, my dear. You—you’ll stick to him?”

The girl’s lips tightened.

“I shall, don’t worry about that. And—Mr. Mannering is going to help us.”

Halliwell turned abruptly, and Peter Lake broke in with a smile.

“Turning sleuth, John?”

“I’ll turn you out,” retorted Mannering, and he told Halliwell, as he had told Marion, of the discovery at the Maycourt and his own belief that it eased the situation for the suspect. “If he would only come into the open,” exclaimed the older man, “it would be such a relief. I—I don’t believe Brian would have done a thing like this, but—but he was careless about his friends. He wouldn’t listen to caution, of course.” Mannering remembered that a ‘friend’ had taken Halliwell away during the alleged robbery at the Maycourt.

“What kind, Mr. Halliwell. Do you know any of them?”

“Oh, several.” He mentioned three or four names of youngsters who divided their time between London and the Riviera. Halliwell’s chief objection to them was their expensive

habits, which his son could not afford to follow. Mannering knew the names, but thought little of the chances of getting help through them.

One thing seemed certain: Mr. Halliwell had no idea where his son might be, and a contact with the friends seemed advisable. Mannering was anxious to be busy. He was entering the affair with more feeling than he had expected, for he was forming a liking for the older Halliwell as well as Marion Delray.

Lady Fauntley suggested that Mr. Halliwell should stay at Portland Place, and he felt that he could hardly refuse. Her complete disregard of the way in which the news would be received by others – probably including her husband – amused Mannering. Peter Lake, alone with Mannering for five minutes, looked really startled.

“That’ll finish her with mother. Entertaining the father of a murderer—social suicide, old man!” He grew serious quickly. “Mother’s all right, but it’s as well Marion’s away for a bit. This engagement with young Halliwell’s been a source of trouble for a long time. Didn’t know him, did you?”

“No. Do you?”

“Met him once or twice. Decent youngster, I always thought, and I couldn’t see what there was against him. Apart from cash, of course. Seeing that Marion’s got plenty in her own right, that didn’t seem to matter much.” Mannering frowned at a new discovery.

“Marion’s rich, eh?”

“Mother’s a trustee, and there’s another about somewhere. Marion inherits a hundred thousand or so from her father, when she’s twenty-five. Quite a stretch yet. I say, John, do you think Halliwell was after her cash?”

Mannering shrugged.

“If he was, and the chances were fair, I can’t see why he should have started jewel-snatching. It’s another complication, though. You had a good impression of him, you say?”

“Oh, yes, carried it well, straight bat and all that. As far as I could see, mind you.” Lake looked worried. “I’d hate Marion to

come a cropper. Quite fond of the kid, and she's broken out a lot lately. But it looks bad against Halliwell, although that might be as well for her. Well, here come the ladies, and I'll be going. Good luck if you try to find Halliwell."

He shook hands, but Mrs. Willison omitted the courtesy. She swept out of the house with her chin in the air, and Mannering laughed to himself.

Ten minutes afterwards he went out, calling Leverson from the nearest telephone kiosk, and Leverson gave him the first real fillip.

"I'm glad you called, John. I've had two of the rubies offered. Through Rummell, and he's expecting a call from you, as Miller. Will you go along?"

Chapter Seven

‘Mr. Miller’

A tall, heavily-built man with thick, rounded shoulders stepped from a cab at World’s End, Chelsea. He wore a pair of morning trousers cut rather too narrow from the knees downwards, a black coat with one or two pieces of cotton and strands of hair, a bowler hat that showed dark hair tinged with streaks of grey, and his face looked full and a little pasty. He paid the driver and added a twopenny tip, and then walked slowly towards a public-house on a corner, graced by the name of the White Lion.

He was Mr. James L. Miller, of 18 Lanchester Street, Barnes.

Officially he was a representative in cotton goods. His calling took him away from home a great deal, and months at a time passed without him appearing at Barnes, a factor that his housekeeper considered admirable.

What she didn’t know was that she kept house for John Mannering, and that Mr. Miller, in other spheres, was the Baron.

Over six months had passed since the Baron had made up as James L. Miller, and at the cloak-room at Piccadilly that morning he had taken longer than usual over the task. The result was excellent. His dark tan had gone, there were lines at his mouth that Mannering had never possessed, and greasepaint had succeeded in making his face look fuller. A little shadowing under his eyes suggested that he might be a victim of insomnia.

Occasionally his lips parted, but his usually gleaming teeth did not show. Actually they were hidden under a thin rubber colouring, which looked natural and made the teeth yellow, with two of them apparently in need of a dentist.

Mannering reached the pub, and looked about him. A bus was standing in the side street, and its driver and conductor

were talking of the afternoon's big race. A dozen people passed him, and on the opposite side of the road there was a small cluster of tradesmen's barrows. The only sign of the law was a stolid constable standing on a corner and looking contentedly about him.

Mannering stepped to a side door of the pub, and opened it. He had not visited Rummell before, but Leverson had given him full directions.

The door opened into a narrow passage, and a flight of stairs, with another door at the top of it. In black, peeling lettering ran the words:

Jake Rummell—Commission Agent.

Mannering turned the handle, and as the door opened a pimply-faced boy looked up from a counter in a small cubbyhole. He looked away again and went on with his task of stamping envelopes. Mannering went ponderously inside, and glanced sharply at the youngster. His voice was hoarse and a little querulous.

"Is Mr. Rummell in, my boy?"

"What's yer nime?"

"Miller—he is expecting me."

"Oke, he said go straight in," said the boy casually, and lifted a flap in the counter. "That's the daw."

He tapped on the door, and this time found himself in a small office, where a girl with brilliantly peroxidized hair was staring at him, her fingers poised above a typewriter. The pillar-box red of her lips was startling, and she had a high-pitched, whining voice.

"You Mr. Miller?"

"That's right."

"Go straight in—sir." The 'sir' came reluctantly.

"Thank you," said Mr. Miller with a little bow, and this time he stepped into the office of the redoubtable Rummell.

He had a surprise.

He had expected someone on the wrong side of fifty, but

instead he saw a fresh-faced man of thirty or a little more, sitting in a swivel-chair, writing quickly. His suit was blue, a shade too light, and with an ostentatious pattern. His tie was a vivid yellow. There was no doubt that Jake Rummell possessed a love of the flamboyant. As Mannering entered he put his pen down and jumped up briskly.

“Mr. Miller?”

“Yes, I—”

Rummell’s hand shot out. It was cold and hard, and the grip was firm.

“Sit down, please. Fag? Cigar?” Mannering looked at the cigars and took a cigarette hastily. Rummell’s metallic voice was coming again.

“Here, I’ve a lighter, don’t waste a match. Very glad to see you, Mr. Miller, always nice to have new clients.” He selected a cigar and faced Mannering. He had a square face, with a well-developed forehead, a thin, pinched nose and unexpectedly full lips. His jaw was bony and prominent, and when he spoke the movements had a slight tendency towards the left side of his mouth. The cheap cigar streamed smoke, and occasionally sparks.

He clapped his hands together sharply. “Sorry to have to make you wait a bit outside—lot of doors, but sometimes necessary. Well, sir, what can I do for you?”

Mannering sat back, acting his part of a middle-aged man to perfection. Against the brisk businesslike manner of Jake Rummell he seemed like a ghost from the Victorian era. He was able to admire Rummell’s caution. The police would have a long job to get from the front door to this desk, and a great many things could be done – and hidden – while they were coming. Yet Rummell had recently served a three-year jail sentence; precautions were not always sufficient to save disaster.

“Mr. Levenson told me, Mr. Rummell, that you have had some rubies offered you. It is possible they are the results of the burglary at Hampstead last night.” Rummell nodded briskly.

“That’s right. Wasn’t going to touch ’em. I’m still close to a ticket, and a murder touch is a bit more than I like just now.

Leverson's call just saved 'em going back. Well, sir?" Mannering crossed his legs. "I want to try and trace the thief," he said. Rummell cocked his head on one side. "Leverson wouldn't send me a dick, but why you want to get that, not the sparklers, I don't know. How much is it worth if I can put you on to the fellow?" Mannering hesitated, and then smiled slowly. "About half of what you're going to ask, I expect."

Rummell jerked his head up, and then laughed, loudly and harshly.

"Pretty fly, eh? I was going to ask fifty, but a pony'll cover it. Can't help you so much, after all. A deal?"

Mannering took out his wallet and began to count one-pound notes on the desk. Rummell watched until ten were down, and then started talking in his sharp, staccato-like manner.

"Micky the Wisk put 'em up to me. Asked four thousand. About right for me—twelve, fourteen thousand between them on the Bond Street market. Following?"

"Eighteen—please continue."

"Know Micky?"

"I'm afraid not—excuse me, was that twenty-one or two?"

"Call it two," said Rummell with a wide grin, showing that his teeth were white but small and well-spaced. "Micky the Wisk has been flying a big kite these days. Come into a fortune or something. Spending twenty a week, was earning three-four when I went inside. I can't make out where Micky is getting his dough from. Not the game, he ain't fast enough. Him and Loffatt —"

"Twenty-five—what was that last name, Mr. Rummell?"

"Loffatt," said Rummell, and Mannering remembered the man he had seen arrested at the Elan Hotel. "Pinched last night. He and Micky run together. Never seen a stone worth more than a hundred from either. Suburban jewellers is their racket, not the high-spot stuff. But they're in money. Listen. Loffatt's been promised a thousand for standing the rap on this, if he keeps his trap shut. He can. Meanin', someone's backing Loffatt an' Micky the Wisk a lot. More than I would," said Rummell with another of those hard, jerky laughs. "That's not my funeral. Got

enough?"

Mannering had pushed the twenty-five pounds towards the fence, and was now sitting back and regarding the man with narrowed eyes. He had learned a great deal more than he had expected, and he was getting hopeful.

Micky the Wisk had been able to offer the stones that had been stolen from Kingley on the night of the murder. He was connected with the man under arrest for the robbery at the Elan – a robbery where the thief had been caught, but without the jewels. It showed a smart organisation, and Rummell knew someone was paying both men. They were working under orders, and it was likely that the orders had come from the man who had killed – or arranged the killing – of Kingley.

"You are being very helpful, Mr. Rummell. Someone is employing—er—Micky the Wisk, what a remarkable name, and Loffatt. Anyone else, to your knowledge?"

"Nope. But the Cat would know."

"Who is the Cat?"

Rummell bared his teeth.

"Loffatt's old woman, Kate. Does fur warehouses, best in the game. Ninety-one Lee Street, Fulham—down by the bridge. Loffatt tells her everything, and she runs him. If anyone knows who's working the same alley as her old man, and who's backing it, the Cat will. Watch her, she scratches." Rummell grinned, perhaps reminiscently. "But she'll keep her mouth shut."

"I see," said Mannering. "But if she is in the pay of these other people, won't she—er—give me away?"

"Depends. How much are you ready to pay?"

"For the man's name? Say a hundred pounds."

"She'll do it for you. She won't touch the narks, that's all. I'll tell her you come from Flick, an' you're all right. She's on the phone. Want any more?"

Mannering blinked a little.

"How—how long have Micky the Wisk and Loffatt been working?"

"Maybe six months. No more. Micky was in the Park with me

up till March. Parkhurst," he added unnecessarily for Mannering's benefit.

"Thank you. You know nothing more?"

"Mister, I don't waste words. I've told you all I know."

"Thank you again," said Mannering slowly, but he was thinking fast, trying to accustom himself to the idea that there was someone pinning a jewel-thieves' organisation, and wondering whether young Halliwell could be the man. "Have you got those rubies, Mr. Rummell?"

Rummell grinned derisively.

"What do I look like? Wouldn't hold 'em for five minutes, but I can put my hands on 'em. Want 'em?"

"I will advise you."

"Have to look smart. They won't stay on the market long, they're too hot. Reckon Micky'd take fifteen hundred, and I'll sell for you at two thousand. Now if you're really in the market, Mr. Miller, how about some green spots? Got a basketful, over from Paris. Year-old job, cold as mutton. No danger, and the lot's up for five thousand. Dirt cheap at the price."

He swung round from his chair, and fiddled with a cabinet against the wall. Every movement was jerky but deliberate. In a few seconds he was streaming emeralds from a wash-leather bag, and they winked and shone upwards, green and lovely. Mannering's love of gems tempted him strongly, but he forced the desire back.

"Thank you, not just now. I—"

Mannering broke off.

Rummell switched the emeralds from the table and into the bag in a flash, while a low-pitched buzzer sounded from the door. Rummell's lips had tightened. He pushed the bag into the cabinet, and then jumped up, as brisk and decisive as ever.

"The cops, mister—come on."

Mannering jumped up more quickly than Mr. Miller seemed capable of doing. There was a second door, and Rummell opened it. They stepped through quickly, and the door automatically closed. By Mannering's head was a small window: Rummell stood on tiptoe to look through.

Mannering could see a police car, and two men getting out of it. He recognised one as a sergeant who worked against the Baron from time to time, and his pulse was racing. The danger of the encounter hardly seemed to matter just then.

Rummell tugged urgently at his sleeve.

“Come on. That’s Dyson, he won’t get a smell.”

He seemed confident, despite his haste. They hurried down a short flight of steps, and then across a small courtyard. Crates of empty beer bottles were piled up by a door through which Rummell led him. In a few seconds they were in the public saloon of the White Lion, and Rummell dropped into a chair.

“Two pales, Charlie.” The barman nodded, and pulled the handle of the tap. There were two busmen, just off duty, and three or four nondescript-looking occupants of the saloon. Rummell pushed a glass of pale ale to Mannering, and grunted: “Get some down you, they might come in.”

“Are—are they likely to find the emeralds?” Mannering asked nervously, trying to keep the manner of Mr. Miller.

“Sure, they’re likely! Tring would, but Dyson ain’t too good at searching. See that Johnnie Walker on top of the till?”

He nodded his head towards the bar, and Mannering saw the bottle, one of five in a row.

“If the neck shows red, I’m for a stretch again. A sixer, sure’s I’m here. You don’t have to worry, they don’t know you’ve been up there. But if she shows, loose yourself from me.”

The man’s voice was low-pitched, and only Mannering caught the words. He could see the veins on the fence’s forehead sticking out like whipcord, but it was the only sign of anxiety that Rummell gave. The other occupants were talking of the newly-started football season, and Chelsea’s prospects: Mannering was thinking of the thoroughness of the arrangements.

If the drawer – built into the wall of Rummell’s room – was opened and the emeralds found, it would show the red light in the neck of a bottle of Johnnie Walker. The ingenuity of it was startling. Rummell, of course, would get away the moment the red showed, but he probably knew he had little chance of

keeping out of the police hands if stolen goods were found on his premises. That was why he did not run immediately: he wanted to be sure of his position before he made any effort to get away.

Mannering was sweating.

Seconds ticked by, and Rummell ordered another pale ale. Mannering could not keep his eyes off the neck of the Johnnie Walker. He stayed where he was, not because it was necessary, but because the police would be watching outside the pub, and he did not want Mr. James L. Miller scrutinised too closely by Bristow's men.

Ten minutes passed, and Rummell began to talk, his strain easing.

"That'll cover it. Thank Gawd it was Dyson. They'll be coming for me in a minute now, but I'll be O.K. Scram, Mr. Miller, look me up any time, and don't forget to be careful with Kate Loffatt. I—Well, I'll go to hell!"

He jerked himself from the table quickly, and Mannering hardly followed his movements to the bar. The whisky bottle was normal enough, but the swing doors of the pub were opening. Mannering turned his head.

Chief-Inspector Bristow entered the White Lion, smart and precise as ever. He stood for a moment on the threshold, taking in all there was to see, from the talkative busmen to Mr. James L. Miller.

Chapter Eight

Word from Halliwell

Mannering nearly made a false move. To find entering the saloon the one man he wanted to avoid as Miller unnerved him for a moment. He drew a sharp breath, and moved his head round quickly. He stopped in time and kept staring idly, his heart jumping.

Bristow moved quickly across the room to Jake Rummell.

Rummell was smiling widely, his wide-spaced teeth gaping. Mannering gave the fence full marks for nerve. Rummell's manner, and Mannering's interest in watching Bristow at work with someone else, eased the tension.

Mannering was surprised, for Bristow sounded affable and he kept his voice low.

"Hallo, Rummell. I'd like a few words with you."

"Oke," said Rummell. "What'll you have?"

"It's on me." Bristow put down a two-shilling piece and ordered a Worthington and a pale ale: obviously he knew Rummell's taste. Rummell glanced round the room, and selected a table two removed from Mannering's. He stared at and past the Baron, and sat facing him. Bristow perforce had to turn his back to the bulky Mr. Miller, and Mannering appreciated the fence's subtlety.

"Shoot," said Rummell, almost too bluffly.

Bristow kept his voice low, but Mannering could hear the words, straining hard while trying to look disinterested.

"We've just pulled Micky the Wisk in, Rummell, and he was seen with you this morning. What did you buy from him?"

Rummell grimaced derisively. Mannering was on tenterhooks, for the fence seemed to be overplaying his hand.

"What, an' yer knows I'm only just out? Take it easy, Mr.

Bristow. I ain't that kind of a mug."

Bristow persevered.

"Quite sure?"

"I'm as sure as I'm sitting here, Mr. Bristow. Micky never offered me anything serious, anyhow. If he 'ad a packet, he says, can I handle it? I says no, I'm on the up-and-up. He says that's dandy because he ain't got nothin'." Rummell winked, and Mannering believed it was meant as much for him as Chief-Inspector Bristow.

Mannering wished the wink had not come. Bristow was working fast to have found the trail as far as Micky the Wisk – the limit of his own discoveries. But had Micky let out more than Bristow revealed? Had he given Rummell away? Rummell seemed confident, but that was no guarantee.

Bristow finished his Worthington, and pushed his chair back.

"All right, Rummell, but it'll go hard with you if you're lying. And next time it's six."

"Six wot?" demanded Jake Rummell bluffly. "Ave one on me, Mr. Bristow, to show there's no ill-feeling."

"I haven't time," said Bristow, "thanks all the same."

Mannering fancied there was a twinkle in the Chief Inspector's eyes as he left the White Lion. The barman stepped to the window and looked out; the two busmen went off. Rummell stayed where he was until the barman turned round with a grin.

"They've gorn, Jake."

"All okey-doke then," said Rummell, jingling coins in his pocket. "One all round on me, Sid." He hitched his chair towards Mannering, and lowered his voice. None of the other occupants of the saloon paid the slightest attention, while Rummell was obviously in high spirits.

"Easy, see? Be careful of old Bill Bristow, Mister, that's a tip. He's smart even if he is the right sort for a dick. Micky won't blow his mouth, though, and it was just a try-on. Anythink else you want to know?"

"Just one thing. Do you know anything about Halliwell?"

"Not a word. And listen, keep off the Cat fer today; Bristow

might be looking around Lee Street. Time for another?"

"I don't think I will, thank you." Mr. Miller smiled and bowed a little before shaking hands and leaving the White Lion.

As he boarded a bus going to Victoria he felt a considerable relief from tension, and yet was uncertain and full of misgivings. To sit close to Bristow without the man suspecting his real identity had its points as a joke, but Mannering preferred things to be less precarious. The knowledge of Bristow's nearness on the same line of investigation was disconcerting.

Mannering had formed the opinion that Rummell was trustworthy, although probably a sharp man in a deal. The fence had arranged his precautions cleverly, and yet he had been resigned to capture. Outside its bearing on the Halliwell case, the meeting with the man had a queer effect on Mannering.

He had never possessed that resignation, yet Rummell, Loffatt, Micky the Wisk and probably hundreds of others who made their living by crime, took it for granted that a few years behind jail doors would come. It was part of their life, just as a trip to the Riviera or to the States was part of his. They took their punishment uncomplainingly, and for the most part they had no more intention of doing bodily harm than the average man in the street. The professional criminal was rarely a murderer: by the same token, the murderer often had a blameless past.

Like young Halliwell, for instance.

The bus reached Victoria. Mannering walked to the nearest cloakroom, removed his rubber teeth-cover and the greasepaint, and managed to rub most of the grey from his hair. The padding in the back and shoulders of his coat was easily removed, and he put it in a small case he always carried while James L. Miller. Apart from the unfamiliar cut of his clothes, he was John Mannering again when he took a cab to return to Clarges Street.

He had made progress; and he felt still more satisfied after another telephone talk with Leverson. Kate Loffatt, or the Cat, could be relied on to give information in exchange for ready

money, and she was a safe confidant. Levenson promised to send the woman a message, after warning Mannering to make sure that he did nothing to create the impression that he was working under cover for the police.

Mannering smiled at that.

"I'll be careful of that, Flick, but are there any of the kidney you don't know?"

"Not many," said Levenson soberly. "I've been in the game for forty years, Mannering, and you get to know people and things after a long spell. Goodbye."

Forty years! All of them except four during the war, Levenson had worked for the criminal classes against the police; and all he had to look back on with regret was a two-year sentence for fencing. Even that had followed a split by someone who had wanted him put aside for a year or two.

Mannering, in grey tweeds of happier fit, walked from Clarges Street to Portland Place an hour later. He wanted to tell Marion what he had learned, and he felt that a talk with Lorna was advisable.

Mason admitted him. At the same moment the drawing-room door opened, and Lorna appeared, dressed for out-of-doors. Mannering knew she had been waiting for him.

"What's happened now—?"

"It's Halliwell." She whispered so that Mason heard nothing. "He's in a Paddington Hotel. Can you come?"

"Where's Marion?" Mannering spoke sharply.

"Her aunt just rang through, and she's talking to her. She's all ready—we've had our coats on for an hour. Do we go, or—"

"Steady a bit," urged Mannering. "You're getting excited, darling, and we've got to take this easy." He pushed open the drawing-room door, hearing the cackling from the telephone and seeing Marion standing impatiently with the phone inches from her ear. Mrs. Willison was probably working off her annoyance. Mannering closed the door as he asked: "Just what happened?"

"Halliwell telephoned the Willison's house." Lorna looked flushed and hot, much more excited than he had expected.

“Peter Lake answered the call, and took a message for Marion to get on the phone to the hotel—Renman’s, near Paddington Station. Lake came through to Marion with the message, and when she phoned she found it was Halliwell. He’s asking for money to get away.”

“Damned young fool,” said Mannering, but he felt sympathy for the youngster he had never seen. “She was sure it was her Brian?”

“If you’d seen her face!” Lorna smiled for the first time, and they heard Marion say good-bye into the telephone at last. She was not as excited as Lorna outwardly, but her eyes looked hot and her voice trembled.

“Lorna made me wait for you. But *please* let’s get off straight away. I’ve got a hundred pounds in cash, it ought to be enough for him, and—”

“My dear girl,” said Mannering sharply, “if you give Halliwell a hundred pounds he’ll try and get out of the country, be caught at a port, and under arrest in less than a day. It’s a certainty. No, don’t interrupt, come here—”

He stepped to the window. Marion, suddenly flushed, bit back a sharp retort as she followed him, and he pulled back the curtain. On the far side of Portland Place a two-seater car was parked, with a peak-capped chauffeur at the wheel.

“Yes, but—” began Marion.

“The police,” Mannering said simply. “And there’ll be others waiting, to follow you whether you go out by car or on foot. If there’s one sure way of stepping into trouble, it’s to go to Renman’s Hotel for Brian.”

“But—I’m—going!”

“Not if we have to lock you in a room,” said Mannering deliberately. “Look here, Marion, we want to do the best by Brian; you’re simply asking him to hang himself. Things are bad enough as they stand. Take a hold on yourself, and show what you’re worth. Go out shopping with Lorna, and let the police follow you on a wild goose chase. I’ll see Halliwell.”

“You will?” She gripped his arm.

“The police will hardly expect me to go after him,” said

Mannerling, although knowing that it was quite possible he would be followed. Confidence in his ability to dodge any man Bristow put on his heels buoyed him up. "Give me a note for Halliwell, and sign it so that he'll be sure it's genuine."

Marion looked both defiant but uncertain.

"But, what will you do?"

"My best to make him go to see the police," said Mannerling.

The girl's self-control broke then.

"No, you won't do it! I'm going to see him and to help him get away. I must!"

"All right," said Mannerling abruptly. "Lorna, it's a perfect afternoon for the river, we'll go. If Marion is determined to be mixed up with murder, and take the chance of being an accessory after the fact, let her. I—"

Marion was clenching and unclenching her hands, but she gave way like a thoroughbred, and not simply because Mannerling threatened to withdraw his help. She had to agree with him, against her will.

"You're right, I suppose. All right. But—but can't I see him first?"

"I'll see what I can do with Brian," promised Mannerling, his manner relaxing. "You'd better get out at once, and keep away from the Paddington area. And before you go, here's some news. The Kingley murder was one of a series of crimes, and I don't think Halliwell's experienced enough to have organised them. Feel better now?"

"Thanks, a lot." The girl's eyes were warm and friendly, and Mannerling felt satisfied as the girls left the room.

Five minutes later he saw them driving off, in one of Fauntley's Austins. Beads of perspiration on his forehead were the measure of his fear that Marion would prove obstinate, and that would have been an obstacle too strong to overcome. The police would have had no difficulty in tracing her to Halliwell, and he was convinced that he needed to see the youngster before he could estimate Halliwell's worth.

He saw the police two-seater follow the Austin, and then sent Mason for a London Directory. Renman's Private Hotel was at

the back of Paddington Station, on a corner and probably easy to find. As he closed the Directory he heard a snorting roar from outside. The window was open, and the din of a car-engine that should have had a more efficient silencer shattered the quiet of the street.

Mannerling stood up in time to see the bonnet of a Talbot racing model come to a standstill. Peter Lake jumped out, and Mannerling waited, smoking thoughtfully, until the caller was announced.

Lake looked wind-blown and excited.

"Hallo, John, where's Marion?"

"Gone shopping. Why the devil don't you buy a silencer?"

Lake grinned fleetingly.

"My tourer's out of service, and I decided it was time to hurry. Has she told you about that call?"

"Yes, why?"

"It suddenly dawned on me that the little ass would probably try to see Halliwell, and she had to be stopped at all costs. She hasn't gone there?"

"You'd have been an hour and a half late, if Lorna hadn't succeeded in impressing her with my omniscience," said Mannerling grimly. "I'm going to see him now."

Lake stared.

"Good God, *you* of all people. But—"

"I want to persuade him to give himself up," said Mannerling. "Coming?"

Lake dug his hands deep down in his pockets. Judging from the fresh oil on his flannels he had been working on the engine of his tourer. A key and some coins jingled mournfully.

"Well—oh, all right, I'll take a chance. But supposing the police have located him? Look bad for us, wouldn't it?"

"That's all right," Mannerling said lightly. "I've a pull with the Yard, and they'll believe in our good intentions. We'll use that monstrosity of yours, if it's safe."

"I'll need to fill up if we're going far."

"Paddington," said Mannerling.

There was neither the need nor the opportunity for talking as

the racing car twisted and turned through the traffic towards Paddington Station. Mannering had made sure that no police were on their heels, and in any case he doubted whether any follower could have kept pace with Lake. The man's driving was superb if disconcerting, and he had the devil's own luck with the traffic lights.

"First past the station and first again," said Mannering at last, "assuming the map was right."

"I'll try it." Lake swung the wheel, and the second turn came sooner than he expected. He wrenched the Talbot round again, and the racer leaned over perilously. Mannering could have put out his hand and touched the road. Lake flashed white teeth as he straightened out, and then trod sharply on the brakes. Mannering, unprepared, lurched forward, banging his head on the windscreen.

"Bit sudden, but we're here," said Lake calmly and before Mannering could speak. "Want me to come in?"

"Park the car a hundred yards away—in the station yard'll do if you can get there without breaking your neck—and then come in. Halliwell's calling himself Johnson." Mannering left protests until later, but his forehead smarted.

"Right, old son." Lake cocked his head on one side humorously. "Marion'll owe you a lot when this is finished."

"I don't know yet," said Mannering. "She may want to curse me."

Renman's was not the hotel he would have chosen for comfort and good feeding. It had a derelict-looking exterior, and the porter who greeted him was grimy and in patched and dirty clothes. There was no clerk, and a beer-stained table with a few bunches of keys served as a reception desk. The registration book was open, thumb-marked and greasy, and five lines from the last entry was scrawled: 'H. Johnson—Room 39.'

The porter leered, revealing pale gums.

"Wanta booka room, sir?"

"Mr. Johnson's expecting me," said Mannering, passing over a shilling. "Is he in?"

"S'far as I know. Fird flaw, sir" – the porter was rubbing

grimy fingers over the tip – “second daw on the left. That’s firty-nine, sir. All right.”

Mannering found the steep stone steps leading to the third floor hard going. The place was filthy, the smell enough to make him sick. He was seeing the seamy side today in more ways than one.

Room 39 was in a dark, narrow passage, and Mannering’s footsteps echoed sharply. He reached the door and tapped, but no answer came. He tapped again, his eyes narrowing, and still there was no response.

Had Halliwell gone?

Mannering’s lips tightened. He slipped a small file from his pocket and bent over the door. The key was inside, and turned. He pushed it back cautiously, heard it drop sharply on the floor, and then started to pick the old-fashioned lock. It was forced after a few seconds of scratching, while no other sound disturbed the silence.

He pushed the door back sharply.

There was a rending, tearing sound, and then a wave of gas that seemed to him like a solid wall. He dodged back, half-stifled, but not until he had glimpsed the figure of a man spreadeagled on the bed.

Chapter Nine

Suicide

Precious seconds were lost as Mannering tried to get a breath or two of clean air, and to stop choking. The gas was billowing into the passage, making it almost as foul as the room, but when he had recovered from that first shock he went back in the room with a rush.

The window was at the side of the bed, sealed up with tape or gummed paper. Mannering doubled his arm and cracked the dirty glass with his elbow. The pane broke with a sharp report, and a gust of clean, cool air swept in. He breathed deeply by the window, and then turned round. The man on the bed was motionless, his mouth open a little, his skin grey near the mouth and nose. Mannering snatched a towel from a handrail, dropped one end in a jug of water standing on a chipped marble washstand, and then laid it lightly on the other's face. He was holding his breath again, for the gas in the room would take minutes to clear; but he had to get Halliwell out in a hurry.

The man was not a heavy-weight. Mannering hauled him over his shoulder and staggered to the door. He was gasping as he reached it, and there was a tight lump at the back of his throat.

Then Mannering caught a glimpse of Lake. He tried to gasp out words that refused to come, but Lake acted without prompting. He grabbed the inert body from Mannering's shoulders, and hurried along the passage. Mannering followed unsteadily, in a daze. Lake stopped by a window and pushed it open, and the grey mass of Paddington Station was for once an inviting prospect. "Try—another room," Mannering muttered. Lake propped the body of Halliwell against the wall, and Mannering managed to keep the man from falling. Lake opened

a door without trouble, and swung back on his toes. "Empty—all right, I'll take him." Five minutes passed in confusion to Mannering, while Lake revealed unexpected qualities. He slung the pillows off the bed, stretched Halliwell across it, and then started to massage the abdomen and below the ribs, forcing the foul air out of the lungs and stomach. Mannering had closed the door, and only the faintest smell of gas was noticeable. A strong breeze was coming from the open window, and the *chug-chug* of a train was like distant thunder.

Mannering slipped a whisky flask from his pocket, took a swallow, and felt better for it.

"Whisky for him, Peter?"

"Toss it over."

"You keep working, I'll do this. We don't want a doctor if we can help it."

"Might have to," Lake grunted.

"We'll give him five minutes." Mannering forced a spot or two of whisky between the grey lips, and watched Lake working methodically. Lake was talking all the time.

"Had a case of carbon monoxide in a garage last year. Pulled the fool round all right. Looks bad, eh? Suicide."

"Possibly," said Mannering.

"What?" Lake stopped for a moment. "You mean—"

"I'm not taking it for granted," said Mannering, "but the odds look all for that theory. Can you manage alone for five minutes?"

"Yes, why?"

"I'd like to look at the other room."

He went back to Halliwell's room, steady on his legs now. The gas was stronger there but it did not worry him unduly, although he damped a handkerchief and tied it round his mouth and nose. The wind was coming in freely, and Mannering bent over the gas fire. The gas was full on. Mannering turned it off and straightened up.

Both the window and the door had been sealed with stout gummed paper, and the chimney had been blocked with a couple of towels and some newspapers. The key was on a

threadbare carpet, a foot or so inside the room. Mannering bent over it, without picking it up. There were one or two scratches that looked newly-made on the barrel of the key. They might have been caused by Mannering's nail-file. He doubted such an explanation, as he had pushed straight back. He might not have been the only visitor in the past few days who had wanted to force the door. Hotels of the Renman type sheltered a queer variety of stray callers, and nothing could be taken for granted.

He wished he could telephone Bristow, but he wanted to give Halliwell a chance of talking first. Bristow would probably be annoyed at delay, but Mannering had a reasonable excuse: the first task was to get Halliwell conscious – if possible – and Bristow would not be able to tell how long the job had taken.

Mannering stepped back into the passage and as he closed the door Lake came out of the next room. He was smiling cheerfully, cupping his hands and raising them above his head.

"Heil, Halliwell! He's coming round, John!"

"Thank God for that," said Mannering soberly. "Peter, I don't like asking, but I'd like to make sure no one came up. If you stood at the head of the stairs, or outside the door—"

"I'll take it," said Peter cheerfully. "It's your game, anyhow. Damned lucky you weren't ten minutes later. All right if I smoke, do you think?"

"Better not chance a blow-up."

"Perishing nuisance," said Lake, but he went to the head of the stairs promptly, while Mannering entered the room.

Halliwell was breathing regularly, a little too deeply to be normal. Mannering closed the door, took the flask from the bed, and tried another spot or two of whisky. It made Halliwell gasp, and his eyes nickered open.

"You're all right," said Mannering quietly.

Halliwell stared blankly for a few seconds, and then he jerked up, his eyes widening with alarm. The effort made him cough and retch with sudden violence, and Mannering grabbed a bowl.

Lake looked in once or twice in the next ten minutes. No one seemed to be worrying about the third floor, and Halliwell was

coming round nicely. He was deathly pale, but there was no danger now. Mannering fancied he would be able to talk soon.

He liked the look of Halliwell.

The youngster had a lot in common with Peter Lake. The same rather rugged face, curly instead of Lake's cropped, straight hair, broad shoulders thickly packed. He was resting against the pillows and staring uncertainly at Mannering as the Baron said:

"Well, why do that?"

Halliwell gasped, and shook his head jerkily.

"I—didn't—do anything. What happened—man?"

"Gas," said Mannering simply.

"*Gas!*" Halliwell's eyes widened, and Mannering knew in that moment that the youngster had not tried to commit suicide. No one could have acted as convincingly as that in the state Halliwell was in. "Good God, someone tried to—kill me."

"It looks like it." Mannering was as matter-of-fact as possible, and his easy manner steadied Halliwell. "Has anyone been to visit you here?"

"No-o. I—I didn't get here until—twelve. I'd been—out all night. A—a friend gave me some—coffee. At—a coffee stall. Hadn't eaten—'part from that. But good God, the police—"

"We'll worry about them in a minute," said Mannering. "First of all, a question. Did you kill Kingley last night?"

Halliwell looked wildly excited.

"No. I tell you I didn't! I—"

"Right-ho," said Mannering, "I'll take your word for it. What happened after you left his house?"

"I—I went to—a pub. On the Great North Road. The Red Eagle. But I—"

"Who'd you meet there?"

"A—friend of mine. Man named Jackson. He'd heard about Kingley on the radio and—and I was pretty scared. I hid out in a barn most of the night. Jackson had to get away, but he came for me this morning. Brought me—over here. I—"

Mannering could see that the other could not keep going much longer. He would collapse again, and probably go light-

headed, and he had talked enough for the moment about the mysterious friend Jackson. Mannering asked quietly:

“What’s Jackson’s address?”

Halliwell hesitated, and then burst out: “Look here, I promised I wouldn’t mention he’d helped me, and—I don’t want to let him in the cart. You’re not the police, are you?”

“I’m not,” said Mannering emphatically. “As a matter of fact, Marion Delray asked me to come. You can say I’m holding a brief for her.”

“Marion’s—sticking by me?” The words were whispered after a moment of silence.

“Good Lord, man, why shouldn’t she? Now, Jackson’s address?”

“Byways, Nelson Street—Bamet. But Jackson’s all right—”

“Thanks,” said Mannering, and he fancied it was safe to light a cigarette. Halliwell took one eagerly, and Mannering wondered whether it was wise to send for tea or coffee. Lake poked his head round the door at that moment, and promised to go downstairs and rummage around or bribe the porter. Halliwell recognised him, and Lake waved a ‘cheerio.’

Mannering sat down on a hard chair, legs stuck out in front and leaning back on the two rear legs.

“That’s good going, Halliwell. Well, you’re in a spot, as you know. Kingley was killed, and Jackson, I take it, pointed out you would be in a bad way. The morning papers confirmed it?”

“That’s right. I—good God, I must get away! The police might—”

“Who put the damn-fool idea in your head that it’s a sensible thing to hide from the police?” demanded Mannering slowly. “Jackson?” He omitted to add that there had been no report on the wireless and Jackson had therefore lied.

“I—well, hardly. It’s obvious, I—”

“Marion’s prepared to take your word that you didn’t kill Kingley, and your father told me a few hours ago he’s prepared to spend every penny he’s got defending you. But every hour you’re missing from the police makes the case worse against you. Have some sense, man.”

Halliwell's eyes were turning glassy.

"It's easy for you to talk. You're not—under suspicion. And I am. Damn it, they'll hang me!"

"You've a twisted idea of justice and the law," said Mannering sharply. "If you didn't shoot Kingley they'll find out who did, you needn't worry about that. The thing looks black, but you might get clear quickly. This affair, for instance, will help. You didn't turn on that gas?"

"No-o. But—did it *look* like suicide?"

"Damned realistically."

"Well, isn't that another—another bit of evidence? If they think I tried to kill myself, they'll say it's because I knew I couldn't get away."

"They will, and you'll deny it. You've got nothing more to do, and they've got to prove to the satisfaction of twelve men that you actually committed murder. Look at it squarely, Halliwell. I'll get you a good solicitor, and we'll brief Hackett for you, if you'll have the police over at once."

"And then I'll have to drag Jackson into it—"

Mannering had other ideas.

"Not unless things look bad. I'll see him first. You needn't tell the police about him yet."

"No—I suppose not." Halliwell drew a deep breath. "And I suppose you're right. Who the devil *are* you, anyhow?"

"Mannering."

"*John* Mannering?" Halliwell looked startled.

"That's right. Wait a moment—Peter!"

Peter Lake had not yet returned, and in the interval Mannering told the other about the developments with Marion, and broke the news of the discoveries at the Maycourt Hotel. Halliwell declared stoutly that he had not been to the Maycourt on the previous night, after leaving for Kingley's Hampstead house.

Mannering was convinced of the truth of the other's story, and he felt relieved. He was glad he could tackle the mysterious Jackson for a start, and he was feeling more cheerful when Lake appeared with three cups of badly-made coffee on a tin tray.

“Drink yours fast if you can manage it,” said Mannering, “and then get on the phone to the Yard. Ask Chief-Inspector Bristow to come here, say I’ve sent for him, but don’t mention Halliwell or you’ll have the Press round.”

“Common sense winning, eh?” said Lake. “How’re you feeling, Brian?”

“Lousy,” said Halliwell frankly.

Now that the decision had been made he seemed to be prepared to face the coming ordeal without a fuss. Mannering admired his spirit, and fancied Halliwell was relieved that he had been persuaded to take the obvious course. He seemed fully satisfied about the good intentions of his friend Jackson. Mannering was content to let him think what he liked, but a visit to Byways, in Barnet, was the next item on the Baron’s agenda, after a few discreet inquiries.

Bristow took just twenty-five minutes to come, and he had Sergeant Tring with him. Lake met them in the hall, and noticed the alarm on the dejected porter’s face.

Bristow lost no time in getting upstairs, and Mannering met him on the threshold of the room.

“Well, what is it?” demanded Bristow. “If you’ve brought me over on a wild-goose chase, Mannering—”

“Easy goes,” said Mannering. “I’ve got Halliwell for you.”

He had never seen Bristow more completely taken aback, and in his smile there was a tinge of mockery, because of their encounter at the White Lion. Halliwell said little, and Bristow made no effort to browbeat him, behaving much as he had done with Rummell. He seemed anxious to get the youngster to the Yard, but Mannering told the story before they started, leaving out only a few unessentials, and any mention of Jackson.

Bristow made no comment, and appeared to take Halliwell’s word that he had not attempted suicide. He was a shrewd officer, but at least he relieved Halliwell. For the moment that was all Mannering wanted.

Two plain-clothes men were downstairs, and Bristow sent Halliwell on with them while Tanker Tring remained to search the bedroom, and to try the key and other articles for

fingerprints. Lake offered to drive Mannering and Bristow where they wanted, but Bristow eyed the racer dubiously. Lake was to hurry with the news to Marion Delray, and Mannering arranged to meet him at Portland Place.

With Bristow, Mannering strolled round to the station approach for a cab. Bristow looked puzzled as they settled in the back. He was pleased with the Halliwell capture, but probably worried by Mannering's part.

"Changing sides, Mannering?"

"I worked with you once before," retorted Mannering, and Bristow, to do him justice, looked amused. There had been a time when he had asked John Mannering to help him catch the Baron, and the joke had not appealed to Bristow for a long time. "Well, Bill, the gas affair makes you think it looks blacker for Halliwell? "

"Yes, it does. Where was the key, d'you say?"

"In the door. Tring will find it, and the scratches. It could have been turned, with a pair of French pliers, from the outside. Someone could have drugged him, and left him to die. Suicide would have been a convenient way out."

"Ye-es." Bristow pulled at his moustache. "But all in all I think we've got the right man. We'll see. By the way," he added with a burst of confidence inspired by gratitude, "we're on the trail of one of Kingley's rubies."

"The devil you are! Quick work, Bill, but I suppose I mustn't ask where?"

"A regular named Barkas, Micky the Wisk in the trade, tried to pass it at a pawnbroker's. They all fall for the old mistakes—excepting the Baron," Bristow added ruefully. "Barkas won't talk, though."

"Like your friend Loffatt of the Elan?"

Bristow scowled.

"They'll talk before I've finished with them. I'm not too happy though, Mannering. It looks like organised jewel robbery, and I don't like it. Halliwell might have been working in the same ring, but got caught up. I suppose you don't know anything about the series?"

“Meaning the Baron doesn’t know?” murmured Mannering. “Bill, I’m sure the Baron finished six months ago. He knows how long to play his luck. By the way, I’m asking Toby Plender” – Mannering mentioned one of the younger defence-specialist solicitors of note, who had been through college with him – “to look after Halliwell’s interests, and if I were you I’d wait until he arrives before worrying Halliwell too much. Ask the driver to take me to Portland Place, will you?”

Chapter Ten

'Friend' Jackson

Some three hundred yards, and three turnings, before reaching Portland Place, Mannering's cabby had to slow down to avoid a crowd of people hurrying across the road. Among them were two or three policemen, and Mannering watched with a mild curiosity until the taxi turned, and he saw Lake's silver Talbot racer.

It was across the pavement, with its nose in the area of a private house. The railings were torn down and the bricks and mortar strewn about the pavement. The two front windows of the house were broken inwards, and a lamp-post was leaning drunkenly against the wall, its glass smashed to smithereens.

It came on Mannering so suddenly that he hardly saw its significance until the cabby had negotiated the crowd and was treading on his accelerator to get through. Mannering tapped sharply on the panel, and the brakes were jammed on.

The driver slid open the partition, performing a minor contortion to do it, and leaned backwards.

"Pull in," said Mannering sharply.

It may have been that he had taken in too much gas to be good for him, affecting his usual self-control, but his hands were trembling as he jumped out of the cab. He had not seen Lake, and he was worried by the size of the crowd. People didn't gather in such numbers unless for a serious smash.

He pushed his way through the fringe of people, until a constable turned round stolidly.

"Now, please—oh, good evening, sir. Nasty mess, isn't it?"

"Looks it." Mannering smiled, relieved that the policeman was the patrolman of Portland Place, and no stranger. "The driver's a friend of mine. I hope—"

Then he saw Peter Lake, who was no longer smiling. Mannering had seen a similar expression on the man's face when he had been taking the curves at Brooklands on two wheels. Now he was talking to a police-sergeant, his words sharp and incisive.

"The child ran straight out, Sergeant; it was the wall or her. Damned criminal to let them run loose. I—hallo, John." He lifted a hand, but didn't smile. He looked savagely angry.

Sitting on a cushion from the Talbot's seat was a girl of three or four, in a torn green frock; she was sobbing bitterly. A nurse and a middle-aged woman were bending over her, and a policeman stepped from her towards the sergeant and Lake.

"Only scared and scratched," he said. "Lucky for her, sir. But you were travelling some, weren't you?" He eyed Lake frankly.

Lake looked as though he would start an argument, and then shrugged his shoulders. His anger seemed appeased.

"I lost control round the corner, and had to step on it. All right, Sergeant, here's my card, and that's broken seven years' record. I'll phone a garage for a breakdown gang."

The sergeant had other things to say, however, and Mannering departed, arranging to meet Lake at the house as soon as he was clear of formalities.

He thought, ruefully, that he was completely out of luck. Although Lake had been given a quarter of an hour's start it was Mannering who would have to talk to Marion. Bristow, earlier in the day, had left an equally unwanted task to him.

The two women had not returned from the shopping expedition, although it was half-past five. Mannering called up Toby Plender's office, and was lucky to find his friend in. Plender undertook to look after Halliwell, and promised to get to the Yard at once.

"But I can't say I like his chances," the solicitor admitted.

Mannering knew that was the opinion of ninety-nine people in a hundred.

"You're guessing badly, Toby. There's a good case for Halliwell, although it's not so plain as the one against him. You go and look after him now, and I'll come round to dinner for a

chat—if you and Mary are not booked.”

“We were going to see *Balalaika*, but we’ll put it off. Bringing Lorna?”

“I think I’ll make it alone this time,” said Mannering. “But if Mary’s free, why doesn’t she slip round to Lorna’s? The trouble is Halliwell’s girl: we’ve got her here.”

“Getting quite a gallant, aren’t you?” demanded Toby with some sarcasm, but he laughed. “All right, old man, it’s fixed. Eight o’clock?”

“To the minute,” promised Mannering.

When Peter returned, half an hour afterwards, he had fully recovered his good temper. Apparently just such a turn as had nearly upset them near Renman’s Hotel had been forced at the corner, and the girl had run across the road from her nurse. Lake had smashed into the wall rather than the child, and suffered no more than a few bruises.

“Try being careful,” suggested Mannering. “Marion and Lorna should be back any time, and I want to get out. Marion will want to rush round to the Yard, but keep her back until half-past six, will you? And tell Lorna, not Marion, about the gas. She’ll pass it on.”

“In short, I don’t get marks for tact,” grimaced Lake. “If you’re not careful with this protégée of yours, you’ll have Lorna jealous, and Jackson on your tail. I—What’s the trouble?”

Mannering’s expression had gone suddenly hard, and he stared at Peter Lake.

“Did you say Jackson?”

“Yes, why?”

“Who is the gentleman?”

“A friend of the family’s, but an effeminate lout. A bit smitten on Marion, although she’s never been more than sisterly towards him.”

Lake was looking curious, and Mannering changed his tone diplomatically.

“Seems too young for the man I’ve got in mind. Where does he live?”

“Out Barnet way.”

“Not my man,” lied Mannering, inwardly exulting, “he’s from Chelsea. There’s a suspicion that he put something over Kingley’s a few months back, and I’d been wondering if young Halliwell was in the middle of a pretty plot, but it doesn’t look likely from that angle. You’ll do just as I suggest with Marion?”

“Trust me,” said Peter cheerfully, “but the Lord knows what storms I’ll call down on my head at home. Marion’s caused it, and—” he shrugged his shoulders phlegmatically.

“I’ll manage. Off hunting somewhere?”

“I’d like to have a word with the police,” said Mannering.

“Lucky dog. Get them to forget that little affair at the corner if you can, will you?”

“And stop you getting a sharp lesson? Not if I know it!” Mannering smiled. “I’ll see if I can get an introduction to the Divisional Super, he might take a lenient view. So long.”

It had been a hard job to keep flippant after Lake had dropped that bomb about Jackson, for it opened an entirely new avenue for investigation. Jackson, Christian name unknown, was a rejected suitor of Marion Delray’s; and the said Jackson was a ‘friend’ of Brian Halliwell’s.

At the time when Mannering was at his flat and making inquiries by telephone about Jackson, of Byways, Barnet, the ‘effeminate lout’ was in a small room on a floor above a billiard saloon in the Mile End Road.

Jackson was sitting in the middle of a trio facing a small desk, and opposite a man sitting with his elbows propped up against it. Every time Jackson looked at the face, he felt sick; he was a man with an exaggerated sense of his own asceticism.

The man was no larger than Matthew Kingley had been, standing less than five-feet-six. One side of his face was normal enough, but the other side was a mess of purple, the result of a severe burn, and the left eye was permanently closed and sunken. The stiffness of the face, because of the disfigurement, gave him a grotesque appearance.

Only the right part of his mouth moved when he spoke, and he was talking slowly, like an automaton.

“So now that Loffatt and Barkas have gone, we have no one available for opening safes, gentlemen. It is unfortunate, but perhaps you have some suggestions?”

He had moved his head stiffly to look at each man in turn. His gaze seemed to rest longer on Jackson than either of the others, and Jackson stirred uncomfortably. He had a long, olive-tinted and womanish face, more often found in a Spaniard or an Italian than an Englishman. His looks were, in their way, perfect, with full, sensitive lips, the nose with its wide nostrils, eyes that were dark and fringed with lashes sweeping his olive cheeks. His forehead was broad and smooth, the hair sweeping back in dark waves. He was bigger than the man at the desk, yet small-boned. Long, sensitive fingers were clasped about his right knee.

“Well, Jackson?”

“Look here, Kulper, isn’t it time you picked on the others? I’ve done more than enough in the past couple of days, a great deal more.” Jackson’s voice was deep and thick.

Kulper shrugged his shoulders.

“A matter of opinion, Jackson. You are always so full of ideas that I naturally looked to you.” There was a sting of sarcasm in his otherwise expressionless voice. “What about you, Greene?”

Greene, on Jackson’s right, was a plump, florid, middle-aged man, with a sharp, decisive voice.

“Count me out, fella, that’s not my angle.”

“It would be useful,” said Kulper, “if you would all help a little more towards the common cause, instead of leaving the thin king to myself and others. McLeish?”

The third man, taller than Greene, bony and sandy-skinned,, looked his nationality and spoke with an unmistakable accent.

“Aweel, Kulper, I’m not so sure we shouldna’ be satisfied for a while. Things are getting hot, almost too hot.”

Kulper lifted his hands slowly. The fingers were small, the skin dry and wizened.

“Very little help from any of you, then. I have observed that you are not so reluctant to claim your share of the proceeds. Do you know, gentlemen, that there are five of us, and others

whom we have used, like Loffatt and Barkas, yet a single man has met with ten times the success—one man alone, working without help or assistance? Or perhaps none of you read the personal columns, and did not see the mention of his name?”

Greene, who had something in common with Jake Rummell, laughed explosively, but defensively.

“You mean the Baron? Cut it out, Kulper, that’s a different kettle of fish altogether. The man’s a specialist.”

“There seems no reason why we should not all be specialists. But we are simply wasting time, we can get no further this way. I wonder if I can inspire you to higher ideals.” The sarcasm was still there, and the voice grew a little thinner. “Walloby’s sold a hundred thousands pounds’ worth of new stones this morning, to Emmanuel Eldred, of Staines. Eldred has been buying for months, and I have been unable to trace-any bank deposit holding his collection. He keeps either all or a large proportion at his river house.”

Greene no longer looked amused, and his red face grew crafty and indignant.

“Cut it out, Kulper. Eldred’s turned that place into a fort, you ought to know it. Employs three guards, all armed. He built a special underground room for his stuff—it’d be easier to get the Crown Jewels than Eldred’s stuff. Have some sense.”

Kulper’s single eye was sparkling.

“How courageous we all are,” and there was an insult in the words. “Eldred must have one of the biggest collections of jewels in England and we—we leave such an opportunity to the Baron.”

Greene stood up abruptly, like a man who was not going to be brow-beaten.

“If you’re so fond of the beggar, why don’t you get hold of him? What do *you* ever do but talk, anyway?”

“Organise,” said Kulper softly. “Organise so that you and Jackson and McLeish get a comfortable living for doing very little that is dangerous.”

Jackson choked.

“Little!”

Kulper flashed round on him.

“For the first time you have been used in the open, Jackson, and that because you had a particular interest in the affair. My own arrangements for the stuff to be planted in Halliwell’s rooms were far more dangerous. Your brother, Greene, made an excellent entry there, and I played my part as an old woman who needed a policeman’s help to get through. Had I been able to trust anyone else I would have done so. As it was, Greene only just managed to escape, in a cab that I had waiting for him. I am not afraid to work; and you would be wiser not to boast.”

“I can do what I like,” snapped Jackson, his sensitive lips trembling. “If Halliwell talks, where am I? Standing a good chance of hanging, damn you! If I’d known you were going to kill Kingley—”

“I have told you before, I did not kill Kingley.”

“No? Then who did?”

“Halliwell—”

“Oh, bosh!” snapped Jackson. “I don’t believe he’d have the guts. I—”

“We’re getting nowhere,” said Kulper decisively. “Remember, all of you, that we shall shortly be trying to get into Eldred’s house, and once we have succeeded we can retire. Just as I fear the Baron has retired, or I would certainly try to get in touch with him. The man has genius—and courage. Both are needed for some things—gentlemen.”

Kulper slipped from his chair as he slurred the last word. He looked absurdly short, perhaps because Greene and McLeish appeared to be so abnormally tall as they followed his example. Jackson remained seated.

“Leave one at a time, please. Jackson, you and McLeish had best play downstairs for half an hour. Greene can follow me in five minutes. I will send further messages in the usual way.”

He opened the door abruptly, and left the trio together. There was a moment of silence, and then Jackson spoke excitedly.

“If we’re not damned careful, he’ll have us all in jail, while

he's scot free. I think it's past time we left him."

Greene was biting his thick lips nervously.

"I'm with you there, if we can, but the man'll be dangerous."

"Well, perhaps you're right," said McLeish cautiously, "but there's nae doot of the money we can collect if we stay with him a wee while longer. It has shown good results, ye must admit that."

"I'm not taking part in anything at Staines," blustered Greene.

"And I'm tired of it all," said Jackson, lighting a match viciously. "It's getting too dangerous. I tell you if Halliwell talks of the part I played last night, it might get me hanged. I'll bet the liar killed Kingley."

"You're worrying yoursel' needlessly," said McLeish; "it was Halliwell, and certain as can be. We'll be getting downstairs, Clive. After we've played a hundred up, where will ye be going?"

"I'm seeing Rene," Jackson said, still scowling.

"Och, an' you've been wanting Halliwell away to get at Marion Delray," said McLeish with a thin-lipped smile. "There's no telling what ye'll do next, Clive. We'll be seeing you, Greene."

Greene shook hands with them both, his fingers flabby and his palm warm, and left the room without another word. Jackson and McLeish went downstairs, played their half-hour of billiards, thus showing their belief in the wisdom of obeying Kulper. Then Jackson phoned his home to say that he would not be in for dinner, and he expected to get back late.

Some half an hour afterwards a maid at Byways, Barnet, told John Mannering that Mr. Clive Jackson was not expected back until one or two o'clock, and that Mr. and Mrs. Jackson were away from home. Could she leave a message?

"No, thanks," said Mannering, "I'll call again."

He did not add that he proposed to call in person, between ten and eleven o'clock, and if his plans went well no one would know he had been. He was hoping that a search of Jackson's room would be informative, for he had taken a violent dislike to

the man he had never seen.

He would go as the Baron.

He had learned that the Jackson family was wealthy: no one would be surprised at a visit of the Baron to Byways, but 'friend' Jackson might think seriously if his room was burgled, and nowhere else in the house was touched. If he found anything to take from Jackson's room he would need to look at the other rooms afterwards. Mannering was seeing all the possibilities quietly and comprehensively, for the Baron was back.

Chapter Eleven

The Baron Breaks In

Byways, Nelson Street, Barnet, was one of a dozen similar houses built in a quiet back street of one of London's residential suburbs in the days when it had not been linked up with the Metropolis, and consequently there had been ground to spare. It had about an acre of its own, and it stood well back from the road. When Mannering passed it in an Austin Ten, at half-past nine that evening, only three lights were burning: one at the back of the house, the reflection of which he could see, the others on the top, and probably third floor. There was no light in the porch, which suggested that the Jackson family had taught their servants to be economical with electric power.

When Mannering was working as the Baron he always used a car that would not be easily identified – as, for instance, his Lancia. He preferred not to appear ostentatious in any way, for on small things success depended.

He had been busy since telephoning the house earlier in the evening.

A visit to the Yard had found Halliwell tired but patient. Toby Blender had already seen him, and Halliwell – who was under arrest – was about to be taken to Cannon Row for the night. Marion had been allowed five minutes alone with him, not knowing that a sergeant had heard the whole of a harmless conversation. Mannering had dined with the Plenders, and shortly after the solicitor's wife had gone to Portland Place had called Plender's curses on his head by remembering an engagement. He had promised to be back at Plender's Mayfair flat by half-past ten, and departed, leaving the solicitor in an easy chair and with all the pertinent points of the case to ponder.

Mannering himself had managed to get a three-minute talk with Halliwell, chiefly because he was known as a friend of Bristow's. In the course of the talk he had learned that Jackson lived with his parents, had a bedroom and sitting-room of his own on the first floor of Byways, and appeared to be very comfortably off. Byways had been described as: "just an ordinary place, Mannering, about a dozen rooms in all, nothing special. Old man Jackson keeps a good claret."

Now, with the Baron's kit in a small case in the rear of the Austin, and with a make-up that differed very little from that of Mr. Miller of Barnes, Mannering drove past Byways several times, and made sure that no other lights went on. At that time of night and with none of the family in the house, the servants were probably taking it easy in the kitchen or in their own rooms.

Satisfied that it was a good moment for breaking in, Mannering parked the Austin in a side road a hundred yards from Byways, leaving the side and rear lights on. He took the Baron's materials from the case, wrapping most of the tools in a canvas strip about his waist. He had not brought a full outfit, for he scarcely imagined Byways would prove a difficult proposition.

In his pocket was the blue silk scarf that he always used as a mask. He rarely put it on until he was inside a house, and he did not propose to make any exception this time. He was keyed up for the job, and he was more than ever convinced of the wisdom of it: to tell Bristow about Jackson might have had a good effect, but more likely Jackson would have an excellent alibi, particularly if he was the driving force behind the Kingley crime, and Loffatt and Micky the Wisk. The police inquiries would then be fruitless, suspicion deepening about Halliwell. In all likelihood Jackson would deny having seen Halliwell on the night of the murder, or the following morning.

The more he considered the position, the more Mannering was convinced it would damage Halliwell's cause rather than help it if he left the interrogation to the police, while Jackson might have the humour to appreciate the irony of a visit from

the Baron.

Mannering walked sharply along the ill-lighted street.

On the far side of the road lights were blazing from all the windows of a house, and light strains of music were coming across the road. Mannering was not sure whether to bless or curse it. The sound would prevent others from hearing him, but it would also make it difficult for him to hear the sound of approach. He would be alert for sounds, others would be taken by surprise, and the music would probably be more of a disadvantage than anything else.

He felt a little uncertain, a little uneasy, ready to snap.

Always before he had possessed a definite object when breaking into a house, something to take, a prize worth gaining which he knew had been there. Now he might find nothing of value and the whole angle might prove a false lead.

Halliwell was unpleasantly close to the charge of murder; and Marion Delray—

Mannering turned into the short drive. The gates were open, and he soon reached the grass verge, making no sound as he hurried towards the house.

On one side, away from the lights at the top, there was a shrubbery that looked promising for his purpose. The night was pitch-dark, apart from the glow behind him, but his eyes soon grew accustomed to the gloom, and he reached the windows quickly.

They did not seem to be specially wired for alarms, but before he prised the catch he tested the space between the frames, with a thin file. The file touched nothing, and he felt satisfied. The catch moved easily, and he started to push the window up, very slowly at first, and then sharply.

There was a single squeak, echoing very loudly in his ears and he paused for a moment, listening intently. Only the strains of the music came, and nothing happened inside the room.

His heart was beating faster than usual now. It was a long time since he had forced an entry, and there was something unfamiliar about it, although he felt the allure of the past. Yet the job was hardly difficult enough to give him a real

satisfaction, and the chance that it would prove a wild goose chase worried him.

He climbed through the window slowly.

First he felt round with his arms, to make sure there was no chair or table that he might stumble over. Nothing was on the path, but he found there was no carpet on the floor by the window. His rubber soles slithered a little on a high polish and once he almost lost his balance.

He reached the square of carpet in the middle of the room.

He had left the window open, in case of the need for a sudden retreat, and the wind was blowing in, light and cool. He knew that no one was likely to walk through the shrubbery close enough to see the open window.

Very slowly he clicked on his torch, pointing the beam towards the floor, and then cautiously lifting it.

It showed him a room sparsely furnished in the modern style, with the door directly opposite the window. Once he had found his direction he switched the light off, and slipped the torch in his pocket.

Then the scarf came into service.

He tied it about his mouth, nose and chin, so that only his eyes showed. His hat was pulled well down over his forehead. The mask was unpleasantly warm, despite the little slit over his mouth, but he kept it on as he reached the door to test the handle.

It did not squeak: the Jacksons obviously believed in oiling their windows and doors. Very slowly he tugged at the door: it opened, and he knew that he was getting an easy passage altogether. The window had been child's play, the door was not even an obstacle.

The hall beyond was as dark as the room.

He stepped through, pulling the door behind him quietly. There was a slight click as the lock slipped in, and he stood by it, poised and waiting.

Still no sound came.

Again he used his torch, wishing that the light had been on, so that he could have made easier and quicker progress. He

stabbed the beam round quickly, finding the stairs to his left. They were thickly carpeted, and wide. He reached them across the polished hall, avoiding a life-like tiger rug in the centre. The beam shone once or twice on trophies of the hunt on the walls, but Mannering did not see them. His pulse was hammering, as though he had never committed a burglarious entry.

Up—up—up.

He made no sound on the thick carpet. The torch was off, for he could guide himself to the top by the banisters. He found the top stair, and a small landing, then another flight of stairs, leading to the first big landing. Again the torch shone, a stab of brilliant white through the darkness. He turned it off.

Then, very suddenly, a door opened at the far end of the passage, and a light streamed through.

The Baron saw a girl outlined against the light, and the shadow of another. Their voices came sharp and clear.

"It won't take a tick, Alice, and you know what he is if 'e don't 'ave his things ready."

"Don't see why you couldn't come up yerself," complained the girl named Alice.

"Always gives me the creeps," said the first speaker. "Come on, Lil, *be* a sport."

"All right, there's no hurry is there?" They were not the best of friends, obviously.

Mannering was pressing back against the wall, with the light casting a dim glow towards his end of the passage. He knew that the servants had come along the domestic staircase, and from the towels in the first girl's hand he judged that they were going to the bathroom. Heels echoed sharply on a stained and polished floor.

Alice giggled suddenly.

"Remember the time when 'e brought 'is lady friend up and I poked my 'ead in? What a lark! You should've heard him afterwards, but he dassent tell his Pa I sauced him, in case there was a fuss. I wouldn't trust *Master* Clive fer five minutes, Lil, would you?"

"Oh, I don't know, he's a nice boy to look at."

Alice indicated her contempt of good looks, with Mannering, hardly daring to breathe, waiting in the shadows. He was backing a belief that they would not come as far as the landing, but he dared not move.

Alice, tall and thin and dressed in cap and apron, reached a door on the right and opened it. Another light clicked on, and Mannering saw the white tiles of a bathroom. The towels went in, and Alice exclaimed in annoyance:

“Now ’oo pinched the soap—oh, there it is. Arf a mo’, I’ll just ’ave a look in ’is room an’ see if he’s got some fags. Some folks want looking after, don’t they?”

“Well, he pays yer for it, don’t he?”

“No, ’is old man do.” Another room, another light, closer to the Baron. It streamed in front of him, very bright; if he moved an inch it would shine on him.

Alice disappeared, Lil went after her. There were giggles and high-pitched laughter before the girls came out. Alice switched the bathroom light off, and they clattered towards the far end of the passage. The door clicked to, shutting off the light, making the darkness thicker and the silence sudden and profound.

Mannering was breathing hard, his lips parted.

Two seconds later and he would have been standing in the passage when the girls had appeared, the alarm would have been raised in a second, and the night’s adventure ruined. That was the appeal of the game, the fascination: one moment safety, the next danger. The success of an enterprise was balanced precariously on the chisel-edge of uncertainty. It was one of the things that had brought the Baron into existence.

The girls had helped him: he knew Clive’s room, his Christian name, and the fact that he had a reputation with women. He was not above using his own home for his *petites amours*, he had looks good enough to appeal to some women, and he was a petty tyrant: somehow all the facts were in keeping with Mannering’s knowledge of that friend of Brian Halliwell’s.

Mannering’s mind flitted from the dark landing to the charge room at Cannon Row where he had seen Halliwell. The youngster would be in a cell now, suffering an ordeal that was

worse if he had not killed Kingley.

The truth, or evidence for it, might be in this house. His resolve strengthened.

He reached the door of Jackson's room, and at his touch it opened without a sound. He closed it behind him, and then stepped across to the windows. The room faced the house from which the music was coming, and the open window allowed a faint melody to float through. Mannering was more interested in the curtains and the blinds.

The latter were thin, little more than casement rollers but the curtains were either left from the previous winter, or the forerunner of the coming autumn. They were brown, dark, and heavy velvet. He pulled them on runners that clattered sharply, and he waited when the sound had died down, turned towards the door and ready for an alarm.

None came.

Softly he stepped across the room to the door. The light switch shone dully under the beam of his torch. Before he switched it on he pulled a large mat to the bottom of the door, and made sure that the light would not show through into the hall.

Then he was able to look about him.

He had a better idea of the nature of Clive Jackson when he saw the sitting-room. It was luxuriously furnished, in rich browns and orange. There were several bookcases, all modern with exotic contents, and a cigarette cabinet next to a cocktail bar on wheels. All that one might have expected in a Mayfair flat was here, to the thick pile carpet, the sober yet almost Eastern manner of furnishing, the photographs – four of the same man, several of different women, all easy to look at.

On a small bureau bookcase a cabinet photograph was resting. Across the bottom was signed:

“Clive Jackson—July 19—”

It was a first-class studio portrait, revealing the man's features well. The rather full, sensuous lips, the dark, long-lashed eyes,

the hair sweeping back from the smooth forehead suggested the voluptuary or the dreamer – or both. Clive Jackson had hardly reached maturity yet, Mannering fancied.

This wouldn't do, though: he wanted the papers, anything that might help him to find the association between Jackson and Halliwell, and the murder and the burglaries.

The Baron started to work in earnest.

The drawers of the bureau were locked, but a small skeleton key from the tool-kit about his waist, was all that he needed for working. A few dexterous twists, with hardly a sound, and the first drawer fell open. A cheque book, a few five pound notes, and other odds and ends were revealed. Mannering glanced through them all, seeing nothing of interest.

The second drawer was filled with bills, and the Baron's eyes widened.

Young Halliwell had admitted being hard pressed for money, but Jackson, despite the richness of the room, was in far worse straits. Three letters out of the first five were sharp and to the point. Unless Mr. Jackson settled the enclosed account within seven days, other action would be taken without further intimation. A bank manager's note about an overdraft was couched in hardly less insistent terms. A jeweller's bill for a hundred guineas fluttered to the floor: it was dated a year before, and across it was scrawled: "*Long overdue!*"

Tailors – two garages – a tobacconist, even a hotel: there were bills totalling at least a thousand pounds in the drawer. Clive Jackson was shortly going to find himself in trouble, unless he made immediate payment: and he would hardly have let the accounts stand for so long had he been able to pay before.

Yet he might have money to come if he had had anything to do with the Kingley murder.

Mannering finished searching the bureau, and two small cabinets in the room. Nothing else of interest was revealed, but the bedroom opened from the sitting-room. He might find something else.

He was surprised when he saw the wall-safe above the satin-

quilted double bed. There was not even a picture over it.

The bedroom showed the same luxurious and exotic taste. Mannering grimaced behind the mask as he stepped to the safe, and made sure there were no wires that would give alarm. It was a simple job, a combination worked probably on a dozen letters.

The light from the room next door was all he wanted. Mannering's gloved fingers worked quickly, smoothly. The tumblers clicked uncertainly, dropping in series or in ones. Right, left, right; Mannering lost himself in the task, and when at last the safe clicked open he drew a sharp inward breath.

"Got you, my friend."

He pulled the door open, and shone his torch inside. For a few seconds he told himself that he had no reward, for the safe seemed empty ...

There were two compartments: he could not properly see the top one without standing on tiptoe. When he did look into it he saw a little wash-leather bag at the back, and he was tense with excitement as he took it out, untied the string, and poured the contents into his right hand. He examined them quickly, and then drew a deep breath.

He knew that he had found the rest of the gems stolen from Halliwell at the Maycourt Hotel.

So Jackson was in it; there was ample reason now for believing Halliwell had told the truth.

Mannering dropped the stones back into the wallet and in his pocket. In a few seconds the safe was shut, and Mannering turned round.

Then, for the first time, he saw the small, almost dwarfed, figure of a man standing between the sitting-room and the bedroom, with an automatic in his right hand.

Chapter Twelve

Red-Handed

He only sound in the room was the Baron's hard breathing. His hands were away from his pocket, and the gas-pistol that he always carried was inside his coat: he could not get at it without inviting a bullet from the gun of the man standing there.

He did not move.

Nor did the little man in the doorway. He was against the light, and Mannering could not see his face clearly. He was wearing a bowler hat that looked a little too large for him, and he did not seem to be breathing.

Mannering moved his right hand a fraction, and then he heard that slow, emotionless voice for the first time, without knowing it belonged to a man named Kulper.

"Stay exactly where you are."

The Baron obeyed: he had to, and yet he was praying that the man would come nearer, and present a chance for using his fists. The gun itself at close quarters was nothing like so dangerous as it was at a five yards range.

"The Baron." The voice was uncanny because of the lack of any kind of emotion, surprise or satisfaction. "Caught red-handed."

Mannering drew a sharp breath.

"It looks like it," he said, and he put all the effort he knew into trying to sound flippant. "But it's looked like it before. Who are you, my friend?"

Kulper lifted his left hand.

"Does it matter? Come into this room immediately, and do not think I shall hesitate to shoot. I have every right to be here: you have none. There is such a thing as shooting a thief in self-defence. You understand me?"

“Perfectly,” murmured the Baron.

The moment of surprise was gone, and his mind was working swiftly. He felt instinctively that the man with the gun could be ruthless, and therefore dangerous, but he doubted the claim to having a right to be in the Jacksons’ house. Why had it been necessary to say so if it was a fact?

“That is good,” said Kulper. “Slowly, please, with your hands uplifted. That is right.”

He stepped back into the other room as the Baron came forward. Slowly, like a grotesque picture, the light shone over the face. Mannering saw the disfigurement first: then the thin lips, the ghastly eye that was closed up, the other staring at him without expression. Mannering felt cold.

“Sit down,” said Kulper. “And make no noise.”

Mannering lowered himself into an easy chair. He was more convinced than ever that the other man had no right here, but that gave little relief.

“Thanks. Can I offer you a drink?”

“I do not drink, thank you. Perhaps you had better have one. You will probably need it.”

“I came out well fortified,” said the Baron. “I’m all right. Do you come here often?”

“Often enough.’ Why are you here?”

Mannering frowned, forgetting that the other could not see it behind the mask.

“Why, should you think? I heard that the Jacksons had a little store of gems.”

“This isn’t their main room. It’s the son’s.”

“The son’s—good Lord! No wonder I found damn-all!”

“You probably found a small wash-leather bag, with a dozen small stones in it,” said Kulper. “Sit back in your chair! Well, how does it feel to be caught?”

“I’ve never tried it,” said the Baron.

If the man would only smile or swear or look vicious it would have been better: that rigid, expressionless voice was something different in the Baron’s experience, and he was not enjoying it. He had always relied on taking advantage of the

human failings of his adversaries: this man did not look human.

“You are flippant, my friend. You are caught, and you cannot possibly get away. Under this cover near my arm is a telephone. A word to the police and you are finished.”

“Well?” asked the Baron, and he was trying to fight against the panic in his mind.

“If you should struggle or move without my telling you, I will shoot,” said Kulper. “I shall shoot straight, and the police would have a dead captive instead of a live one. I do not think that would cause them a great deal of annoyance. Put your left arm along the arm of the chair.”

Mannering obeyed, slowly, trying to work out a plan of action.

“Untie your scarf with your right hand. Remember, it will not be wise to make a false move.”

Then the Baron knew it; he had never felt more helpless, never so much at a man’s mercy. But there was one consolation, when his mask came off no one could recognise him as Mannering, and the suffused light of the room would not reveal the make-up. He undid the knot slowly. The scarf dropped from his face, and on to his neck and chest. He kept his eyes narrowed – the one feature he could not disguise – as he returned that frigid scrutiny.

“So. I am looking at the Baron—the great Baron.” Kulper rolled the words round his tongue, and yet they seemed lifeless. “What is it worth to you, if I allow you to go?”

Mannering leaned back a little in his chair. A smile played at the corners of his mouth: Kulper would never know the effort it cost.

“Oh-ho! You’re going to try and make on it, my friend. Supposing you call the police? They might be interested to see you as well as me.”

“They would not.” Mannering was forced to believe the man, for there was conviction in the way in which the words were uttered. “I should be known as a friend of Jackson’s. I have a key, and he has given it to me. If I prefer not to be seen by the police, I can shoot and leave you here. They might look for me:

it is doubtful whether they would find me.”

“You’re experienced in the ways of the lawless?” demanded Mannering still flippantly.

“In the ways of the world, my friend Baron. I repeat, what is it worth if I allow you to go?” Mannering hesitated.

He had not the slightest desire to let the man believe he had come here for a special reason. It had been assumed that he had come on a straightforward job, and that point needed pressing home. If he refused to try to deal, it would suggest he was bluffing too hard.

“Shall we say—five hundred pounds?”

The right side of the man’s mouth curled a little, the first time he had even tried to smile.

“You value your life cheaply, Baron. Had you said five thousand I might have been interested.”

Mannering leaned forward: it was time to start acting, and he began quickly, with a passion in his voice that could hardly fail to convince.

“All right—let’s stop joking! But I can’t find five thousand, nor the half of it. Fifteen hundred—”

The lip twitched again.

“In three years you have stolen—shall we say a quarter of a million pounds worth of jewels? And in three years you have spent all but fifteen hundred pounds! You will hardly expect me to believe that.”

Mannering was leaning further forward, and his eyes wide, his lips working a little.

“It’s true I tell you! I can’t sell for a tenth of what the stuff is worth and I’ve lived pretty high! I might find two thousand at a stretch—”

He hardly knew why, but he had a conviction that he was pleasing the dwarfed, grotesque little figure in front of him. That single green eye seemed to glow with pleasure, and the right lips were turned upwards. However, not once did he get a glimpse of the man’s teeth.

“So—you have lived high, and you are hard pressed for money.”

Mannering snapped out the next sentence harshly.

“Damn you, why should I be doing a fiddling little job like this if I wasn’t in need of ready? The big jobs cost money and they’re dangerous. I can’t try them too often—I can’t get the stuff. Look here, if you’re playing with me, get it over. Call the police and be damned to you!”

There was silence, and Kulper sat down slowly on the edge of a chair seven or eight feet from Mannering. He rested the gun on a small table next to him.

“Do not be careless, please. You see—” His right hand moved, so fast that Mannering hardly saw it, and a moment later the gun was pointing as steadily as ever. If he had ever had any tendency to doubt the capability of the man in front of him, it disappeared. The man could and would shoot, and the chances of making a successful fight were far too few.

Yet why was the other talking?

“Excellent: you are impressed.” Kulper shrugged. “Baron, you are entirely in my hands. You can get a long sentence in prison simply for being here. Your past record would mean, I should say, fifteen years in jail. You do not look young. You would be fifty perhaps when you came out—fifty, and a poor man on your own admission. You realise how completely you are at a disadvantage?”

Mannering tightened his lips, judging it policy to keep quiet.

“For my silence,” said Kulper, “I want ten thousand pounds.”

Mannering half-jumped from his chair.

The lightening-like movement came again, and he stared at the gun as though he were scared out of his life. He sank back, scowling, his lips working.

“Damn you, it’s hopeless! Ten thousand! Why, I haven’t got two!”

“There is another way,” said Kulper.

Mannering hesitated, and then showed a grudging interest.

“If you’re fooling—all right, what is it?”

“Some work for me, of the type you will doubtless admire, Baron. But before we go further, I will tell you the conditions. This room will be undisturbed until one o’clock, when its owner

normally returns. You can, therefore, stay here until that hour, if necessary. I will arrange for a photographer—”

Mannering raised a clenched right hand, but he was trying to get at the idea in the other's mind. The fellow was trying to corner him; there was no doubt of that: but why?

“Damn you, it's a trap—”

“How absurdly melodramatic,” said Kulper. “It is a reasonable precaution. Baron. You see, I have not even asked your name. You will stay here until you are photographed. On the back of the photograph will be your signed statement that you were here with intent to steal. Once the police have a photograph of the Baron, they will be content. It would not be a long task for them to find you.”

“They've never seen me face to face.” Mannering's heart was beating fast: the other believed that the police knew nothing of him, and his reputation was standing him in good stead. “It would mean prison—”

“Only if the police were given the photograph,” said Kulper.

Mannering stared.

“Look here, what—”

“Allow me. I shall retain the photograph, particularly the negative, while you will do certain work for me. You will be in excellent company, although you will perhaps hardly appreciate it. You understand?”

“You mean while I obey you I'm safe?”

“Exactly that. While you obey me, you are safe. I require nothing more than the photograph—perhaps the only one in existence of *the Baron*. Of his other self, perhaps—but then the police could find that much more easily than I.”

Mannering was scowling, although his pulse was steadier. He believed the urgency of the danger was past.

“All right, damn you. What do you want me to do?”

“That is the wrong spirit,” said Kulper, nodding his head to and fro like a grotesque doll, “it might cause you considerable harm. Tell me, you know the jewel collectors of this country reasonably well?”

“I know them very well.”

“Excellent. What do you know of Emmanuel Eldred?”

Mannering was really startled by that.

He knew Eldred slightly, and he knew of the house at Staines, and of the precautions Eldred had taken to make sure his collection was never stolen. Eldred did not announce everything, but there was an underground room, furnished and comfortable, but guarded so closely that the chances of a thief getting in and out were very remote. A year before, when the Baron had been working for gain and little else, he would have been interested in Eldred’s precautions: they constituted the type of challenge that the Baron had always found it difficult to resist.

Dare he try it now?

“I see you do,” said Kulper. “I am making arrangements to have Eldred’s house visited, Baron. I had arranged, in fact, for several people to help me, but now—the Baron can succeed where no one else could hope to get in. You see how great is your reputation?”

“It’s an impossible job!” Mannering’s voice was hoarse with well-feigned alarm. “You know it is!”

“So? You remember the English Museum, some years back? The Hatton Garden robbery? The affair of Didcotte—all equally ‘impossible’ tasks, yet successfully accomplished by the Baron. But—” Kulper leaned forward a little, and he actually managed to seem almost human. “We need not quarrel. Get Eldred’s stuff—a quarter of a million they say—and for your freedom and the negative, we will divide. You will not be working for nothing. Half of the proceeds, and you get the negative. You understand, my friend? And it can be the forerunner of many other ventures, especially profitable. I can help the Baron where he finds it difficult. Information—plans—explosives—tools, even men for the rougher work. I have made my offer, my friend, and now—your answer.”

Kulper lifted his left hand, took the gun in his right, and rested small, wizened fingers on the telephone. The two men eyed each other while the seconds ticked by.

Chapter Thirteen

Decision

Mannering was thinking fast and coolly, faced once again with a vital decision. He was sure of two things. The man in front of him meant what he said: his suggestion had been made in all seriousness. The fellow could call the police, shoot the Baron, and be away and out of reach without the slightest danger.

There were other possibilities, sound theories, if not facts.

The Baron believed that he was looking at the man who had arranged Kingley's murder, who probably employed Clive Jackson, who had perhaps employed Brian Halliwell. Bristow had spoken of organised jewel-robberies. The man in front of him had spoken of 'good company' for the Baron.

More effectively than he had expected Mannering had jumped into the middle of the affair. It was no longer a matter of detached interest, no longer a fight for Halliwell and Marion Delray, but a fight for himself, and a grim one.

If he refused it meant death, or the police.

If he accepted the offer, a photograph of him – in a disguise that the man with the scarred face had not suspected – would be in existence. Naturally a man would hardly expect a disguise to be covered by a mask: few people would have expected it. The photograph, had it been of John Mannering, would have been damning. Even as it was, the man in front of him would have a piece of evidence that would be dangerous to a point; the Yard might be able to get measurements of the face to compare with Mannering. It would be serviceable to the police only as secondary evidence, but by itself would not be enough to cause arrest.

The writing on the back – Kulper would make Mannering do that – might also be dangerous, but no man had been convicted

on handwriting alone, and from a negative it would be practically valueless, even to experts; certainly it would not be a point that a prosecution dared submit to judge and jury without substantial corroboration.

So if he agreed to the proposal he would be free for the time being. He could consider the Staines burglary, and if he decided against it, he could lose the fellow with the scar. That small, uncanny man would doubtless have the Baron followed, but Mannering did not feel perturbed by that.

“Well?” said Kulper slowly.

Mannering drew a deep breath, like a man accepting a thing against his will.

“All right, but Eldred’s place is impossible I tell you. It’ll be suicide.”

“*Your* suicide,” murmured Kulper. “And I am sure that when you are fighting for your freedom and safety you will find a way of overcoming the apparently insuperable obstacles. Excellent, my friend. I am going to call some colleagues of mine, don’t be alarmed.”

Mannering nodded and stood up. Kulper did not move for his gun, and the Baron knew the other believed he was dealing with a beaten man.

“Where’s the whisky,” Mannering made his voice hoarse.

“Not so well fortified, after all? I thought perhaps you would find that. There is a cabinet over there.”

He did not warn the Baron against trying to make a reprisal, and Mannering admired the man’s subtlety as he helped himself to a strong whisky, to impress his captor – and heard him speak softly after dialling a number that Mannering had not been able to follow.

“Greene. Send a man with a good camera to Jackson’s place, will you? Yes, yes, at once. Do you know where Jackson is?”

“He’s with McLeish, at the Hula Club.” Greene’s voice echoed clearly enough from the earpiece for Mannering to hear each word faintly.

“Good, good. Get him, ask him to accompany the photographer, otherwise we might have the servants alarmed. It

is urgent, Greene, an hour at the most.”

Mannering found the next half-hour unnerving in the extreme. His companion did not smoke, drink nor speak. He seemed completely spiritless, but there was a menace in his silence and his confidence. Mannering was beginning to wonder where he had under-estimated the situation.

He had no chance to fight, whether he thought it necessary or not.

The gun was there all the time, and he knew that it would be suicide to jump, or to throw a glass at the other. After thirty minutes he broke a long silence with a curse, and: “Look here, after I’ve gone tonight, what happens?”

“You will call on me.”

“Where?”

“At the Status Billiard Hall, Mile End Road.” Kulper’s lips twitched. “Should you imagine others than yourself would care to know where to find me, remember you do not know my name, nor can you be sure that my unhappy disfigurement is not carefully assumed, like your mask. You will call—shall I say Monday? All arrangements should be made by then. At two o’clock in the afternoon, and you will ask for the private saloon. Is that understood?”

“I’ve got it,” said Mannering jerkily.

“That is good. Now quiet, please, I want to think.”

Certainly Kulper had every reason to believe that he had scored a complete success. Mannering looked and acted like a badly worried man, and when at last there came a tap on the door he jumped round nervously.

“It is all right,” said Kulper, and raised his voice. “Come in.”

Mannering watched the two men who entered carefully, on the alert all the time.

Greene was tall, florid-faced, dressed in a green suit, and wearing green suede shoes. His red neck bulged a little above his tight-fitting green-striped collar. He was wearing a pork-pie hat that he did not trouble to take off, and carrying a Leica.

The second man was an exquisite, and Mannering’s eyes narrowed, partly in disgust. He wore black. Instead of a tie he

affected a long, flowing bow. He was carrying his Homburg hat, and his waving black hair was perfectly arranged, probably marcelled. He wore patent leather shoes, and walked with a silent, easy grace contrasting absurdly with Greene's brisk but bovine movements.

So this was Jackson.

Mannering had managed to make the jittery porter at Renman's confide in him. The porter had testified to seeing 'a proper pansy' enter the hotel soon after 'Mr. Johnson'. There was no longer any doubt in Mannering's mind of Jackson's visit to the hotel.

Greene glared round. Jackson saw Mannering, kept his eyes on him, and closed the door. Mannering was prepared to be wary of the expression in those sloe-black eyes, an expression almost of recognition.

Mannering's heart began to bump.

"What is this, Kulper?" Jackson spoke.

Mannering was uncertain whether to be elated by learning the name or scared of Jackson's manner. He was ready in those seconds to make a do-or-die attempt if necessary.

"A friend who called to see you," said Kulper slowly. "The Baron, Jackson, who is needing small change. We were talking of him only this afternoon, and now we have him with us. Yes, he has agreed to join us, for a consideration. Excellent, don't you agree?"

Greene pushed his hand through his short hair and stared.

"Well I'm damned! The very fella—"

"Why was he here?" asked Jackson, and still his eyes did not move from Mannering. Did the exquisite recognise him? Or had he discovered that he was wearing a disguise of sorts? Mannering's heart was thumping as Kulper replied sharply.

"I have told you. He burgled the house. I came and caught him, making the position excellent for us. Now don't begin to raise objections, Jackson."

Jackson looked sullen, and Mannering's fears quietened.

"It looks damned funny to me. What does the Baron want to come here for?"

"Why does he want to visit a hundred houses like this?" demanded Kulper, and Mannering was laughing to himself, although there was an edge to his laughter. Kulper was defending him, Jackson was dubious. For a reason, or ...?

"What are you going to do?" asked Jackson, adjusting the fall of his trousers as he sat down.

"Photograph him," said Kulper quickly. "Back, front and side face. Get his signature to a statement of tonight's burglary—and then if he should later change his mind about joining us, it would be useful as a method of persuasion. Who is going to take the pictures, Greene?"

"Me," said Greene with a wide grin, and he licked his square lips. "Kulper, I hand it to you."

Kulper nodded, showing neither appreciation nor disapproval.

"Step forward, Baron. Get to work, Greene. Now Jackson, sit back and behave yourself. You are beginning to be a nuisance."

Jackson's lips twisted, and Mannering no longer considered him dangerous.

"I am, am I? Why the devil did *you* come here tonight?"

"Because I had an impression this afternoon that you were thinking of trying to retire, and I wanted to reason with you. Remember you would be in an awkward position, should I decide to use all my knowledge." Kulper was suave and confident. "I feel that Halliwell's arrest makes it all the more important that we stay together—and I am prepared to use pressure, much though I would dislike it."

"You damned blackmailer," Jackson flared. "I—"

"Strong words, my friend," Kulper's eyes rather than his words made Jackson sit back, in silence. "Is the light good enough, Greene?"

Mannering was beginning to sweat. It was damnable that the two ends of the affair should bring them together, but he was in no frame of mind to appreciate the irony of it. He had the cheek pads in his mouth, and they would hardly suspect it. Nor would the rubber film over his teeth be suspected. But the grease-paint and the lines – very few it was true, but enough to notice –

would surely be seen, especially when Greene stretched up and took a shade from the lamp. The brilliance made Mannering blink, for his nerves were at breaking point.

"It is all right now," said Greene complacently.

He knew his job, and took his time. Mannering was still sweating when the eighth photograph – two from four angles – was taken. Then Greene closed the camera with a snap and grunted his satisfaction.

"Now that admission," murmured Kulper.

It was over in ten minutes. Mannering, as he had expected, was told to write it himself. He had taught himself to write several different kinds of hands, and the brief admission to the burglary at Byways – from which Kulper dictated, he had been released by Clive Jackson on the understanding that he did not repeat the burglary – looked nothing like the script Mannering would have used. The police would of course suspect there was a different motive, but if they had a good chance of getting the Baron they would not press or inquire too far.

He blotted it, and handed it to Kulper. The man with the scar smiled for the first time, showing the teeth at the right side of his mouth. The disfigurement was real enough, there was no disguise about it.

"Is that all right?"

"Excellent, thank you," Kulper said.

"That's all you want?"

"What about his name?" demanded Jackson, still sullenly. Mannering fancied he was more concerned with Kulper's real reason for being here than with the Baron.

Kulper shrugged his shoulders.

"Would he give a real one, Jackson? A false name and address means nothing to us. These photographs are exactly what we want, he cannot fake them."

"Look here, can I go?" Mannering broke in impatiently.

"With pleasure," said Kulper.

Mannering looked doubtfully about him, and then stepped to the door. No one made any attempt to stop him. He opened it irresolutely, and then went into the passage. The light was on

outside, and no one moved behind him.

He closed the door and let it bang. He held the handle so that it did not latch, and he heard Kulper's sharp and half-expected order: "Follow him, both of you. What car have you got?"

"My Singer." This from Greene.

"Get downstairs quickly. Don't let him go to roost without getting the address."

Mannering's teeth were clenched as he heard the orders, and then raced for the stairs. He was in the hall when he heard the upstairs door open again, and he was outside the drive gates of Byways before Greene and Jackson let themselves cautiously out of the house.

He dallied deliberately.

In the shadows of Nelson Street it was easy to make sure that the others were following him. He reached the Austin, a car with a false number-plate and which would never be useful to any trailers, and jumped in. As he turned towards the main road he passed the Singer, without a second glance. Greene had moved fast, for it was parked outside the house from which a dance band's music still came clearly.

Mannering was breathing more easily, and there was a gleam in his eyes, that devil-may-care glint that had been with him so often in the past.

"Beautifully clever, Mr. Kulper—but not so good! Come on, Greene, I'm in a hurry."

They were held up several times at traffic lights. Mannering made sure that he did not give any hint that he thought he was being followed, and he led them on the straightest route to the West End.

He left the Austin at a garage in Drury Lane, and finished his journey by foot. Both Greene and Jackson followed him, one on either side of the road. Short cuts took him to the block of flats where Toby Plender lived.

It was one of three blocks; he passed Plender's and went into the next. There was a list of empty flats displayed, including Number 71, on the third floor. He slipped the card bearing the number from its socket; no one saw him. He caught a glimpse of

Greene on the far side of the road, and Jackson passing the entrance as Mannering walked to the lift and hurried in. It was an automatic, and he pressed the button for the third floor.

He had to move fast, to take a chance. Jackson would follow up the stairs, and be perhaps two minutes behind him. Mannering raced to Number 71, the furthest flat along the passage, and rang the bell imperiously for safety's sake. There was a name card outside the door, probably left by the previous tenant, for no answer came.

The Baron had never worked quicker than he did just then.

His skeleton key slipped into the lock, and his fingers twisted and turned it in a fight against time. He could hear footsteps coming up the stairs: whether Jackson's or Greene's did not matter, he had to have the door open before a man arrived.

The lock was more awkward than he had expected, and he was perspiring freely when at last it clicked back. He glanced covertly towards the right, and saw Jackson reach the end of the passage. Mannering's lips parted as he disappeared into the empty flat, and closed the door.

Jackson's footsteps came softly along the passage, stopped for a moment, and then went backwards. Mannering waited for ten minutes, and then cautiously opened the door and peered out; no one was in sight.

Now that he was here, he had a chance to make himself presentable. The flat was furnished, and had a bathroom; he used it to clean his face and remove the rubber and the cheek pads. From the man that Kulper and the others had seen, John Mannering slowly emerged, cheered by the success of the ruse.

He was ready in a quarter of an hour, and with the exception of one or two oddments he needed, he put his tools in the attache case, determining to lose it before returning to Plender. There would be a sensation if they were found in the flat, and probably a newspaper headline if the blue mask was connected with the Baron; he did not want Kulper disabused yet.

A dozen people were passing the block entrance downstairs, but neither Greene nor Jackson were in sight. Mannering laughed as he turned right, towards Plender's block, and three

quarters of an hour after he had promised to return, he knocked on the solicitor's door.

Plender, a tall man, pale-faced, and with a Punch of a chin that gave his face a clownish look at times, was facetious on the matter of punctuality. However, he settled down quickly to hear what Mannering could tell him of the case for Brian Halliwell. Mannering spread himself.

At Byways, Jackson and Greene were telling Kulper that the Baron had a flat at 71, Hare Court Mansions, W.1, that Jackson had actually seen him open the door and go in. That final discovery had made even Jackson more cheerful.

"I told you, we have him—there." Kulper, with a rare gesture, pressed his thumb on the table. "Now we will see what can be made of Eldred's strong-room. We see the Baron again on Monday next at two—and Monday evening, I think, for the job."

Mannering, with half his mind on Plender's considered opinions, particularly of the alleged suicide attempt, and half on the uncomfortable hour he had spent at Byways, was wondering whether policy would dictate an attempt on Eldred's. Unless he could obtain the photographs quickly – and so far he had no idea where to find them – he would have to go to Staines.

If he tried and failed it meant his finish. The finest strongroom in the southern counties, a challenge on three points – to the Baron's ingenuity as a cracksman, to his ability to outwit Kulper if he obtained the haul from Staines, and to his chances of clearing Halliwell through it – was difficult to resist. Further, it was vital that he should get the photographs and negatives.

He had several days to work in before Monday and his appointment with Kulper at the Status Billiard Hall. Mannering began to see the possibilities, and his spirits rose.

Chapter Fourteen

Preparations

“It would be useful,” said Toby Plender plaintively, “if you listened now and then to what I was saying instead of dreaming. Losing your enthusiasm for the job, John?”

Mannering, who had been staring at Plender without seeing him, widened his eyes and then shifted his position.

“Sorry, old man. No, I’m not tiring of it. I’ve seen one or two other ways of helping young Halliwell. Were you saying something that matters?”

Plender moved his under jaw up and down and he looked almost grotesque.

“I was making an impassioned demonstration of how Halliwell stands a one in a hundred chance of getting off on the present evidence. I doubt whether Hackett would waste his time on the defence as it stands, and that’s frank.”

“I thought our eminent Counsel liked an odds-against case.”

“He doesn’t mind three to one, but these are a bit too heavy. He likes to think he’s defending an innocent man, too, if he’s taking a chance. Are you listening?”

“Get me a whisky and I’ll listen even to a Jeremiah.” Mannering stood up and stepped to the table where the decanter and glasses were standing. “Toby, Halliwell’s innocent.”

Plender scowled.

“There’s some Coivoisseur in the right-hand cupboard, try it. You seemed damned sure of yourself. Keeping anything back?”

Mannering went towards the cupboard, talking as he took out a bottle of old brandy and two glasses.

“I’m keeping a lot back, old man, but it’s not information I can hand out to you or Hackett. If I could you’d have it like a

shot.”

“Remember I’m a lawyer,” said Plender. “And if there’s one thing Hackett and I won’t stand, it’s half a story. I might in the present case because you’re in it, but Hackett’s a man who never lets friendship over-rule his judgment. Put all the cards on the table and let’s see the hand.”

Mannering handed him his glass, and savoured the Coivoisseur.

“My yarn won’t sound pleasant in your honest ears, Toby, but I’ll ask you a question. Do you know a man named Leverson? Flick Leverson, of Wine Street, Aldgate?” Plender stared, his half-smile disappearing. “I know of him. What’s he got to do with this?” “Nothing direct: a great deal indirectly. I’ve met him several times, and we’re by way of being friendly. I put the Halliwell job up to him, and by degrees he found many things that are interesting. But as it reached me from Leverson, which is a crooked route, in the opinion of the police, it isn’t likely to appeal to Hackett. Following?” He sipped the brandy and nodded in appreciation. Plender put his glass down without touching the drink.

“John, you’ve played the fool enough in the past, but if you start truckling with Leverson you’ll be in Queer Street a damned sight quicker than you realise. The man is dangerous.”

“What’s the matter with him?”

“He’s the biggest known buyer of stolen jewels, and I don’t suppose the police are ever far away from him. Look here, you haven’t *bought* stuff from him, have you?”

Mannering chuckled: Plender could only appreciate half the humour that was gleaming in his friend’s eyes. If Plender knew the whole truth—

Mannering sobered up. Plender must not be given anything that could be construed into a hint of Mannering’s other identity.

“Hardly, old man! But he did offer me some stuff once, and I took a liking to the fellow. As a man he’s all right, isn’t he?”

Plender scowled.

“Ye-es. An unusual type. It’s odd that he’s a fence, for apart

from that he could readily be taken as honest. All the same, dirt that sticks to him might stick to his friends. You're known as a collector, and if Bristow, for instance, learned you were on nodding terms with Levenson, he might get interested."

Mannering waved his hand airily.

"I know, but there's no need to worry about it. And we're getting away from the point, Toby. I can see, through Levenson, that there's something bigger behind the Halliwell affair than there seems to be. Through Levenson I've managed to find who is running it. I think I can get the proof—"

"And if you don't, you may land yourself in the dock beside Halliwell," said Plender disapprovingly. He took his brandy up slowly, cupping it in his hands as he eyed Mannering. The latter's eyes held a devil-may-care expression that Plender had seen years before, when Mannering had been down to his last thousand pounds, and then found luck turning with him. Plender believed that his present fortune had been made from success at the tables and the race-course: he did not know just what form of gambling Mannering had specialised in, and he was consequently worried now. "Is it worth the risk? What does Lorna think of the position?"

Mannering cut the end of a Corona-Corona.

"She started it," he said simply, and Plender lifted his hands in mock despair.

"My God, what a couple! So you're backing Halliwell, and to get proof of his innocence, which you believe in as touchingly as Hazel believes in fairies, you're playing with Levenson and other things that are poison. And you want *me* to be an accessory."

"One mistake," said Mannering, "and keep your five-year old daughter out of this. All I want you to do is handle whatever I can offer you as evidence. You've told me Halliwell's in a bad way: I know he's innocent. If I've got to touch hot stuff to clear him—well, I've touched it before. But if you'd rather I went to someone else—"

Plender wagged his chin.

"I'll take it. But I can't promise Hackett will."

“When’s the trial likely to start?”

“Pretty soon. It’s in time for the start of the next Session and it’ll be put up early, there isn’t much else of note coming along. Say a month.”

“Well, there’s time to work in. What notice will Hackett want?”

“About six weeks,” Plender grinned.

“Damn you,” said Mannering tartly, “it’s a ruddy sight worse than War Office red tape. Sorry, Toby, but I want a good man, and if Hackett and you are going to be plain cussed—”

“The great John Mannering fails to see a joke,” smiled Plender. “Look here, I’ll fix an appointment with Hackett for you at his chambers tomorrow. I had another one for him, but it’s been cancelled, so he can fit you in. Eleven o’clock. Can you manage it?”

Mannering looked relieved.

“I’ll be there. But I’m serious about the thing.”

“I’ve gathered that,” said Plender dryly. “I hope you don’t burn your fingers. At least you persuaded Halliwell to give himself up, and that was sensible.”

“Meaning, I haven’t got the thing entirely out of proportion,” said Mannering. He stood up, glancing at his watch. “Well, unless you feel like a hundred-up—”

“Mary’s due back at eleven-thirty, and I’ve a heavy day tomorrow,” Plender said. “Wait for her, and then get off.”

Mannering waited, but for less than five minutes. Mary Plender, a woman whose plainness was usually forgotten in the charm of her smile and her manner, returned at a quarter past eleven. The Plenders were the only couple of Mannering’s acquaintances who kissed whether they’d been separated for a month or half an hour, and did not let the presence of their closer friends deter them. Plender had confessed once that in ten years of marriage they had never seriously quarrelled, and the five-year-old Plender twins – a boy and a girl – were perfect examples of what children should be, neither cheeky nor too subdued.

Mary was short, inclined to plumpness, and in her quiet way

did a great deal to keep Plender from neglecting his social obligations. Her pretty, light hair had a sheen of gold, and she was always superbly poised.

“Have you finished talking, or must I be the mouse?”

“We’ve finished,” Toby said. “I knew he was a lunatic, but I didn’t think he was a damned fool. Halliwell—”

Mary took off her hat and shook her hair out briskly.

“Halliwell didn’t kill Kingley, Toby, and if he did, I’d want to prove he didn’t for Marion Delray’s sake. I’ve never taken to a girl so much.” Her eyes shone. “If you two and Hackett can’t get him off—”

“Great Scott!” exclaimed Plender, “she’s gone crazy too. I’ll have to see this Delray girl—”

“You keep to business,” said Mary firmly. “John, Lorna was going to bed when I left, but if you’ll ring her when you get back to the flat she’d like it. I wish you’d get married.”

There was a moment of awkward silence. It was unlike Mary Plender to make a *gaffe*, and Toby looked taken aback. Mannering’s face was sober for a moment, and then he shrugged.

“What the gods forbid,” he said, and Mary smiled quickly, warmly.

“That’s fine, John. I just hated to think there wasn’t a reason. I’m forgiven?”

“I wonder if Toby realises what a lucky dog he is?” asked Mannering lightly. “Goodnight—and I’ll be at Hackett’s chambers at eleven, Toby.”

The night air was cool as he walked back to Clarges Street, thinking more of Mary Plender’s words than of Halliwell. She just “hated to think there wasn’t a reason.” That was Mary: there were dozens, or hundreds, who imagined a reason; and while gossip did not worry the man, it must be having a disastrous effect on Lorna’s reputation.

To make it worse, he himself was in a damnably tight corner on the Halliwell affair. He remembered Kulper’s manner, his own feeling that the man was dangerous. He had won one round, but there was a long way to go yet. The only consolation

was that he had an outlet for his stored up emotions, that if it had not come the Baron would have started work again on something else: it was the only antidote to the poison of a love that was reciprocated yet could not be consummated. Either that, or going abroad and leaving Lorna behind.

“Not if I know it,” said Mannering aloud, and his mind was working smoothly again on the subject of Brian Halliwell, and Kulper’s knowledge.

Lorna only wanted to say good night, and by one o’clock Mannering was asleep. He, too, expected a busy day to follow and a day that he would probably find harassing.

Mortimer Hackett, K.C., had burst into prominence ten years before when he had successfully defended a man and wife accused of murdering their only child, for the insurance. The case had seemed a foregone conclusion, but Hackett had, with a violence that had seemed like wild abandon, seized on the one weak link in the prosecution’s case, and gained a ‘not guilty’ verdict that had caused a storm of disapproval. He had been vindicated three months later when the real murderer had been arrested on a minor charge, and betrayed himself to the police. From start to finish it had been a dramatic trial, and Mortimer Hackett had taken full advantage of it. He was one of the most prominent barristers at the Bar, and there were times when he seemed to play to the gallery – or the jury – more flamboyantly than reasonably. If he dramatised everything he touched, he succeeded in building up a reputation for defence in murder trials second to none. There was little of the quiet, solid, convincing reasoning of Hastings or Jowitt: he addressed the court and the jury more like a stump speaker at a close election contest, with a deep, booming voice that seemed part of his big body.

When Mannering entered Hackett’s office that morning, he saw a man of nearly fifty who weighed eighteen stones. Hackett was clean shaven, with a babyish skin and small, trembling lips that seemed to indicate nervousness. His blue eyes were rather small and restless, darting to and fro all the time. His hands and

feet were absurdly small for a large man, while his hands were almost an alabaster white.

He was reputed to have the vilest temper in the Temples, but that was more pose than fact. Mannering had never met him before, although he had heard him in Court several times.

Hackett shook hands as though he was afraid of wasting time.

"Well, Plender, damned inconsiderate of you to fill my morning up, I could have done with a few hours. What's the trouble? Not Mannering in a slander action I hope? Wouldn't touch it."

Mannering offered cigarettes.

"Not that, yet. I—" "Take that case away," said Hackett heavily. "How can I smoke and keep a voice? What is it then, what is it?"

Beneath the bluster, Mannering saw interest. He could not admit a liking for the man yet, but Plender had appeared to be fond of the K.C.

"The Kingley murder," Plender said, sitting down unasked. "And Brian Halliwell."

Hackett's lips pursed into a little button and he blew noisily.

"What d'you want to come to me for?"

"Halliwell," said Plender.

Hackett glared at Mannering.

"Don't be a bloody fool. There's nothing in the case to defend. Hasn't a chance. Been talking to Ffoulkes about it. Dinner last night. Cut and dried case, no room for doubt. Forget it. Friend of yours, Mannering?"

Mannering dug his hands into his pockets. He was close to losing his temper, but that would be a useless thing to do. It was disturbing, too, to think that Hackett had already been over the ground and talked with an Assistant-Commissioner of Police about it.

"His fiancée is."

"Pah! Woman in the case. Strong point against Halliwell. That Willison woman wouldn't hear of marriage to a pauper. Halliwell had to get money. Don't tell me only a fool would

have killed Kingley with that evidence against him. More fools in the world than hairs on my head. Can't touch it, Plender."

There were perhaps a couple of thousand small hairs on Hackett's practically bald head, with a little fringe of hair about the ears, but the humour of the allusion was lost in the realisation that Hackett was blustering to cover his interest. Plender seemed well satisfied, and Mannering grew more hopeful.

"All right," he said, "I'll see Arundel."

Hackett narrowed his eyes and glared.

"Huh, Arundel. If he can make a case of it, I can."

"I know," said Plender, and he seemed to lose interest. "As a matter of fact with all the stuff we have it's hardly worth your while, Timer."

Hackett wrinkled a fleshy, hooked nose.

"I don't like being called Timer. And you're lying. If you had a good case you'd have been out with it by now. What I asked Ffoulkes was: did Halliwell try to gas himself or didn't he? Ffoulkes said yes—"

"Had Halliwell died, it would have been murder, not suicide," Mannering said. "Halliwell had been drugged, and the room was sealed up while he was sleeping. I've been out this morning. I think I know the man who did it, but I'm not giving that to the police yet. There are other things to come, and if the police step in it will make my man close up like a trap."

"The room," Hackett said, using his booming court voice for the first time, "was sealed and locked *inside*. Inside, you understand, *inside*. The window wasn't big enough for a man to get out of, and it was also sealed. Are you trying to deceive *me*, sir?"

Mannering stared, and then his lips curved. Hackett's glare slowly disappeared, and he smiled for the first time: it was a flashing, remarkably attractive smile, and his boom dropped away.

"All right, all right, as a point of interest how did they lock the door?"

"As it's always done—with a pair of barrel-shaped pincers.

With Halliwell dead, apparently a suicide, there would have been no more interest in the case, and—”

“I’m not a child,” snapped Hackett. “If you tell me you know it was a fake suicide, I’ll believe you. If it was fake, then I’ll believe Halliwell’s innocent. If I believe a man innocent I’ll defend him. Have you told Plender all you know?”

“Yes, so far.”

“All right, unless you want to you needn’t stay.” Hackett offered his hand, and smiled again. “Often wanted to meet you, Mannering, God forgive you if you’ve sold me a pup. Goodbye.”

Mannering taxied from the Temple to Aldgate, for another talk with Levenson. He had not been followed that morning, which proved Bristow was still unsuspecting, and he could still move freely.

He had told Hackett he knew who had tried to murder Halliwell, believing it was the truth. Jackson, Greene or Kulper were responsible. The evidence of the verminous porter and his ‘proper pansy’ made Jackson seem the likeliest suspect. Mannering knew that the porter had said nothing to the police. He was the type who would go a long way to put one over the Yard. He might prove a reluctant witness. If Bristow was able to tax him with withholding information, and offer proof, the man would testify all right. There was a sound case developing for Brian Halliwell.

Mannering drew a blank with Levenson.

The fence did not recognise Kulper or either of the others from the description. That was a disturbing factor, for it proved that none of them were known criminals, and were therefore likely to be difficult to handle. Kulper seemed to be the leading light: Mannering imagined that he had a long record of crime, but he had already suspected that Greene and Jackson were comparatively fresh to the game.

“Have you seen Loffart’s wife?” Levenson asked.

“The Cat? No, now that I’m on Kulper’s tail, and the others, it hardly seems necessary.”

Levenson smiled and shook his head.

“See the Cat. She might be useful, Mannering. Particularly if she takes a liking to you, and it’s possible that she will.”

Just an hour afterwards Mannering, disguised as he had been when Greene had taken the photographs, knocked at the door of a tall, four-storied house in Lee Street, Fulham. On one side of the street were terraced houses, grey, dirty, dilapidated. On the other was a derelict factory, while behind it the river rolled sluggishly, and an occasional blare of a siren reached the inhabitants of Lee Street.

Mannering saw an oldish slattern, with her hair hanging loosely over her shoulders and her blouse unfastened at the neck to show the tops of dirty, shapeless breasts. Was this the Cat?

“Is Mrs. Loffart in, please?”

The slattern leered at him.

“Fird floor, mister, go *straight* up.”

The stench inside the house seemed to hit Mannering as he entered the narrow, dark passage. The paper was peeling off the wall, the doors had not been painted for years. A skeleton-thin tabby cat sat on the stairs, unmoving. Mannering stepped over it, wondering again whether he had been wise to come here. The second floor was as bad. The third seemed cleaner, and Mannering hoped that the Loffatts paid more attention to their living quarters than the people in the lower rooms.

A card was stuck to the door with a drawing-pin, and Mannering read: “Mr. and Mrs. T. Loffatt.” For Lee Street, that was high class, and Mannering tapped and felt more hopeful as he waited for the door to open.

It opened unexpectedly, and Mannering had a shock.

For the Cat – if this was the Cat – was no more than thirty: and despite the flamboyancy of her dress, and the superfluous make-up, was a woman worth looking at. As he glimpsed the room behind her, he saw modern furniture and decorations that would not have been out of place in Clarges Street.

The Cat’s eyes were heavily mascaraed, and her painted lips opened. Mannering fancied she was startled, and assumed it was because she had expected another visitor.

“Sure, I’m Kate Loffatt. Come in, mister, come in. It’s about Loffatt, I suppose?”

Mannering smiled as he entered the room. The Cat closed the door as quickly and silently as she had opened it, and went in front of him, standing with her left hand on the table, the fingers widespread. Their brilliant red nails with the long white points robbed the hand of attractiveness. The Cat’s tight-fitting woollen jumper and skirt, both light green, emphasised a full figure while detracting from its charm. Her waved hair was yellow, obviously hennaed, yet it suited her. Mannering had seen her type, the same bold-eyed, brazen but good-looking woman, at the bars of the bigger hotels and nightclubs. There he would have judged her to be a high-priced prostitute; here he was by no means certain. Her eyes, very bright and starry, and obviously treated with drops, seemed ingenuous; but he was not taken in by their brightness.

He tried to get the right perspective in his approach.

“Yes, in a way it’s about Loffatt.”

“O.K. Let’s drink on it.” She turned with a lithe grace that flaunted her figure, to a cabinet fitted into one wall. As she went Mannering glanced at two or three papers on the table; and as he saw one of them, his body stiffened, and for a moment he felt panic.

For a photograph was there, a photograph of the Baron. *Kulper’s* photograph.

Chapter Fifteen

The Cat

Mannering did not see the Cat turn her head, swiftly and without warning, as she took a bottle from the cabinet. Her voice, deep contralto and a little hoarse, broke through his momentary stupor.

“Sure, I recognised you, Mister. No harm done. What’ll it be?”

Mannering made a big effort.

“It’s a bit early, but a whisky. When did you get this?”

“Maybe an hour ago.” She poured the whisky with a steady hand, but his eyes widened when he saw that she was drinking absinthe. “Take a seat, stranger, they’re comfortable. Here’s mud in your eye.”

Mannering lifted his glass. The Cat smiled for the first time, and showed her teeth, very large, white and glistening. She leaned forward, glass in hand, and pushed cigarettes with the other hand towards him. So far she had won all the rounds, and she was quite self-possessed.

“Let it come,” she said.

Mannering found a smile as he struck a match.

“The photograph took me off my balance.” It was as well to admit the obvious, and it might help to make her think that he was simpler than he was. “You’ve guessed who I am?”

“Sure. The Baron. How should that worry me?”

“I think we’ll understand each other,” said Mannering, leaning back and drawing deeply on his cigarette.

Kate Loffatt was in a companion chair to his, made of steel tubing and comfortably padded. The room itself was an eye-opener, but apart from the first impression he took no notice of it. The incongruity of the furniture after the dilapidated

downstairs flats was startling, but did not affect the point at issue.

He was a great deal more interested in the woman.

Now he could study her, he could see that she was bigger than she appeared at first sight; not fat, but big-boned. Although she was sitting back and there was no expression on her painted face, she succeeded in emphasising the voluptuousness that was the stand-by of her type. She was certainly as hard as nails, and it was easy to believe Rummell when he said that she had been known to scratch.

“Sure, we’ll know each other.” She drawled, but her expression did not change any more than Kulper’s had done on the previous night. “And if you glim me much more, Mister, I shall be mistaking your intentions. I’m not for sale.”

Mannering smiled slowly, with real amusement.

“I fancy not. Mrs. Loffatt—”

“Kate.”

“Thanks. I’ll put my cards on the table. I know Loffatt was taken at the Elan for a job he was doing for someone else. That someone met me last night, and took photographs. If you hadn’t had the photograph I might have talked differently. Now you’ve got me in a spot. You know who I am, and I’m telling you that I’m interested because of the man with the scar. I wasn’t at Jackson’s place last night by accident.”

The Cat smoothed down her woollen skirt.

“That’s straight, Mister. I knew you’d been at Jackson’s, the Boss told me. Over the phone, that’s all. Let’s cut the cackle. What’re you after?”

Mannering had already weighed his thoughts up, and decided it was worth a gamble.

“I want Kingley’s murderer.”

She smiled again, slowly, making her face seem older.

“I’m following, all right. And the Boss has caught himself, eh? Strike me! That’s a new one.” She didn’t laugh, but she seemed amused. “Well, I don’t know who killed Kingley.”

“Was it on the programme?”

“The Boss’s? Maybe. He did the Kingley job, but I’ve heard

he's saying he didn't kill Kingley. That's O.K. by me, he was born bad, but not a liar. So what?"

Mannering tapped the ash off his cigarette.

"I hardly know. I didn't come prepared for you to recognise me."

"Well, what were you going to offer if I didn't?"

"For information that might help me find the Kingley murderer—say a hundred pounds."

"Show me it," said the Cat.

Mannering took a wallet from his pocket, without hiding the fact that it contained considerably more than a hundred pounds. He counted out twenty fivers, and rested them on his knee as he put the wallet back. Her eyes followed every movement, and when he had finished she laughed for the first time.

"That's what I call a business man, stranger. O.K. I can't give you Kingley's murderer, if it wasn't Halliwell, but I can keep my tongue still with the Boss. Meaning he needn't know you've called. You follow?"

Mannering pushed the hundred pounds over leisurely.

"It's arranged."

"Sure. But you're trusting, aren't you?"

"Sometimes it pays," said Mannering. "Now you may be able to give me more information. I'll pay for it if you can. What's the Boss's name?"

"That's an easy one. Kulper."

"Meaning that's the name he goes by?"

"It's the only one he's got," Kate said, but she was smiling with her teeth close together. "Save your breath, I'll talk. Loffatt and others work for Kulper, and he pays well if they get put inside. Loffatt'll have a thousand when he comes out, Kulper keeps his word that way. And he puts business in my way while Loffatt's inside. Not that I want it. No, listen. Kulper's got it worked out in small points, and if you're after him you need all the luck that's going. The photograph came my way in case I could recognise you. I've seen Kulper twice, but not for long, and I know Jackson and Greene. Greene's too fresh, Mister, by a long way, but he can take a good picture. Kulper's racket" – she

was talking quickly and her voice sounded monotonous – “is a smart one. He picks the clever safe-men to do his jobs, and keeps in the clear himself. I reckon he’s been running the racket a year and more, and he’s aiming for a big clean-up. Greene’s been out here this morning, and he reckons Kulper will make the Baron do the job at Staines. Maybe he will. Now if you want to ask questions, shoot, but make ’em snappy.”

Mannering nodded briskly.

“I’d known or guessed most of that, Kate. But I’m glad to have it confirmed, and I’ll take your word that you don’t know more.” He stood up, with his hand at his pocket. “Fifty?”

“Keep your money, you can have it for nothing. But listen. If you’re going to that billiard hall—”

She broke off with an unspoken question, and Mannering nodded.

“Well, it’s your business, stranger. But when you get there, be a ‘yes’ man. It ain’t healthy for folk Kulper don’t like, or for fellers Kulper reckons are trying to put anything across him. I’m speaking plain. I’ve known men go in there, and wake up on a mortuary slab. That’s Kulper.”

Mannering felt the little pulse ticking in his forehead. It was a warning that he dared not ignore, and one that would make him a hundred times more wary than before. He felt uncomfortable under the intense stare of the Cat’s starry eyes.

“Thanks a lot,” he said. “And I’d like that photograph.”

The Cat laughed softly.

“Take it. You don’t waste words, stranger. Listen—do you have a lot of spare dates?”

“At times,” said Mannering, smiling easily.

“Well, if you feel inclined I’m on the phone, and it’s comfy here. Some folks give away what they don’t sell, and maybe I’m like that. Don’t forget to call.”

Mannering left Lee Street ten minutes afterwards. The Cat had insisted on another drink, but she had said little. Mannering had a firm conviction that he could rely on her silence as far as Kulper was concerned, and he respected the woman’s

shrewdness. It was a facet of underworld life that he had not met before; but he was half inclined to be as wary of the Cat as Kulper. In certain circumstances she would be dangerous.

As he walked towards Wandsworth Bridge Road, where he could get a bus for the nearest station, he ruminated over the fact that he had seen more of the real crime personnel in the past few days than all the time he had been working as the Baron solely for the sake of the Baron. This was crime: people with their own set codes, as rigid as Toby Plender's, but on a different scale. Rummell, the Cat, Greene, Jackson, Kulper, Loffatt and Micky the Wisk. Of the bunch, Kulper was by far the most dangerous. Kate Loffatt had simply confirmed his impression that the man would not stop at murder. It was true that the Kingley murder might have been done in a moment of temper, but he was inclined to think it had been carefully considered. As carefully as Halliwell had been made the scapegoat. According to the Cat, Kulper did not make a habit of lying. Well, that was as it might be, but he would not care to place too much reliance on Kulper's word.

Mannering felt heavy-hearted as he boarded the bus, but not until he had secured a taxi at Walham Green Station did he sit back and take the photograph from his pocket. He stared at it fixedly, frowned and put it away again. It was entirely different from what he had expected; the likeness to the real Mannering was almost frightening.

Three-quarters of an hour later he was back at Wine Street, and Levenson was suggesting lunch.

"Thanks, I will," said Mannering. "You'll get tired of me soon, Flick."

"I'm not worried, but you are. What about?" Mannering took the photograph from his pocket. "There's the evidence Kulper's got," he said. "If it's identifiable as me, I've got to go through with whatever Kulper wants, and damn the risk. He'll send it to the Yard otherwise. Well?"

Levenson stared for several seconds at the photograph, and then at Mannering. His fresh face was graver than usual and he drummed the fingers of his one arm on the edge of his chair.

“You’ll have to go,” he said slowly. “If the Yard get that, they’ll have you. Kulper knew you were disguised all right. They’ve touched the thing up, made your cheeks thinner, and taken out the grease-paint lines. It’s a bad likeness, but it’s John Mannering, and I wish it wasn’t.”

Chapter Sixteen

Quick Change

It was half-past three before Mannering reached the Fauntleys' Portland Place House. He had spent two hours talking the situation over with Levenson, and no matter what angle had been touched it had grown more and more apparent that the Baron would have to be busy in order to save himself from the consequences of that ill-fated visit to Jackson's house.

Even now he could not see that he could have acted differently. There had been a dozen occasions in the past when he had been faced with a gun and a man: but Kulper had been a different proposition from any of his previous opponents, and Mannering could still vividly recall the way the man had made his flesh creep. By posing for the photographs he had at least prolonged his freedom: whether he had saved it he did not know.

Yet not until he had seen the photograph on the Cat's table had he suspected the extent of the danger.

Mannering may have gained a trick by getting into the empty flat, but Kulper had trumped it. The manner in which the effect of the cheek pads had been removed, with the grease-paint shadows and lines, was the work of a genius. Kulper had not shown his suspicions of the disguise, but he must have seen it immediately.

In the taxi, Mannering had been more than afraid of the truth, Levenson had confirmed it bluntly. Now there was a quick change, from a detached interest to a deadly seriousness. The fight was a deeper one now.

It would be a pretty piece of irony, thought Mannering, if an affair that he had started out of a desire to help an innocent man and girl should land him in dock, when burglary for

personal gain had left him safe from the police. Justice perhaps, and yet—

He heard Mason walking along the hall, and swore at himself.

“This won’t do, my son. Nothing’s bitten you yet.”

Lady Fauntley, Lorna, Marion and James Halliwell were at tea. Mannering took a cup and sat by the window, joining in the ebb and flow of conversation. No one asked him whether he had learned anything helpful: they were all behaving in exemplary fashion, and he was particularly appreciative of Halliwell’s silence, as well as Marion’s.

The older man had been at Jutland, and Lucy Fauntley had urged him to talk about it. While Halliwell’s deep, pleasant and slow voice was coming, Mannering had time to study Marion Delray.

She had grown older in the past few days. He could see the difference in the set of her lips, and the frequent narrowing of her eyes. When she smiled it was soberly, not with the gaiety that should have been hers.

Mannering wondered what they would say if they knew the truth, and how far he was implicated. Especially Lorna ...

She would blame herself, of course, and because of that Mannering did not propose to tell her everything. The photograph seemed to be burning a hole in his pocket, and it was hard to resist the temptation of showing it to her.

Mannering offered cigarettes, and Halliwell finished:

“It’s been said that the affair was badly handled, but in the circumstances I don’t think Jellicoe could have done much else. Eh, Mannering?”

“I’m sure he couldn’t,” interrupted Lady Fauntley with a bright smile, and she tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear. “Well, that’s all over and done with; I *do* hope there won’t be another war, but with *all* these dictators and the Indians and everything, what is going to happen I’m sure I don’t know. But still, *that’s* not so important as it might be at the moment; we always think of ourselves, don’t we? What happened with Hackett, John?”

Mannering laughed: that was typical of Lady Fauntley, to bring the thoughts in all their minds to the fore, as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

“Hackett’s taking the case,” he said. The relief in Halliwell’s face, as well as Marion’s, was enough to repay him. “He’s the best man we have, and I’ve persuaded him to believe that Brian’s innocent. But that’s only half the job. You’ll both of you make him tell everything, won’t you, whether it seems to implicate him or not.”

“I don’t think we’ll get more out of him than you have,” said Halliwell frankly.

“He *has* told everything,” Marion said intently. “He wouldn’t lie to me, and he promised me that everything he knew should come out. Have—have you got any farther?”

“It’s hard to say,” said Mannering, “but I think it will work out all right. Brian’s told me one thing he’s keeping from the police at my suggestion, and I think it will bring results. I—”

Before he could go on, Mason’s voice came from the door, announcing Peter Lake.

Peter came in breezily, for once dressed in a well-cut flannel suit, instead of in the greasy clothing that he usually affected when he had been working on his cars. He smiled to everyone, waving a hand and asking plaintively whether he had come too late for tea.

“Of course not,” said Lady Fauntley. “Did *Gertrude* send you round?”

Peter’s face dropped, and there was a general chuckle.

“This is getting too close to thought-reading for my liking,” he said lugubriously. “As a matter of fact she did ask me to come and say that if Marion will come back, and forget about what’s happened, she’ll let it make no difference to her.” Peter grinned. “She’s still hoping. I told her it would be no go, but you know how things are. Answer’s ‘no’, isn’t it, Marion?”

Marion hesitated, and Lady Fauntley spoke quickly.

“My dear boy, of course, and *do* take your tea, my hand’s getting tired. Gertrude wants her to desert poor Brian” – seeing that Lady Fauntley had never met Brian Halliwell, her

assumption that she knew him well amused Mannering and Lorna – “and it’s most *absurd*. Tell her that, Peter; some bread-and-butter, or cakes? There were some sandwiches, and John was hungry, but if you’d care, I’ll ring for more.”

“This’ll suit me, thanks. Well, offer turned down after due consideration. That’s the stuff, Marion, stick to your guns. Any developments at all?”

Halliwell told him that Hackett was engaged.

“Good work. Your friend Plender did the trick, eh, John? But that’s only one side; I wish there was something where we could use an honest fist or so, and a bit of intelligence. Nothing doing, I suppose?”

He cocked his head on one side as he looked at Mannering. In that moment the Baron was assailed for the first time with the idea of using an accomplice. If he went to Eldred’s place at Staines he would find a man like Lake extremely useful. However, it meant too much in the way of explanation, and the idea died as he said “No.”

“Oh, well,” said Lake. “Look here, why not do a show this evening? Cheer Marion up no end, and if you came, John, and Lorna, it would make a foursome, and—well, you know what I mean. Idea accepted or am I squashed again?”

“Accepted,” said Mannering promptly.

He wanted to prevent Marion saying ‘no’, and he was glad, later in the evening, that he had. They chose a musical-comedy with less farce than usual, and the girl forgot herself during most of it. They were home by midnight, and Mannering went straight to Clarges Street.

He felt grim, more than a little desperate.

The size of the problem itself was worrying, but as far as he could see he had no choice left. He half-wished Kate Loffatt had not talked so much about Kulper, although he knew it was invaluable information.

The Status Billiard Hall seemed to grow more sinister.

On the following morning he took a cab and deliberately went past it several times. It was a double-fronted building on the main road. The plate-glass windows had been painted green,

but for a long time had needed another coat of paint. The lettering, partly worn off, was black, and one corner of the window in the door had a hole in it large enough for a man's fist. Once Mannering was able to glimpse inside: he saw a dozen or more green-covered billiard tables, two of which were in use.

It was on the Saturday night when, as Mr. James L. Miller, he visited the hall.

The inside was tawdry. The tables needed recovering, but as far as he could see it was well-conducted for a low-class billiard saloon, where you could get an hour's play for a shilling. Fifty or sixty poorly-dressed men and youths obviously used it as a club in the evenings. Mannering recognised two men who had been in prison within the last year, but no one concerned in the present affair appeared.

He played with a man who had asked him whether he would care for a game, and deliberately cued like a beginner. Had he played seriously he doubted whether he would have beaten his opponent, whose dirty fingers could guide the cue-ball anywhere. The man scored three hundred in the hour, while Mannering had just passed the first three figures.

Mannering, or Mr. Miller, paid up cheerfully, drank a cup of half-cold coffee, and left the hall. No one followed him, and he did not think he was suspected. He had seen the rear entrance – apparently there was only one – and discovered that a flight of iron steps ran from the second and third floors to a courtyard at the back of the hall. At the end of the courtyard ran a small alley, and he knew that was the route which the bodies later found in the morgue had taken.

He found the Cat's metaphors and the Cat herself looming unpleasantly large in his mind. The confident assurance with which she had spoken grew more worrying.

Yet unless she betrayed him, Kulper could have no reason for thinking the Baron had tried any tricks. Jackson had even 'located' his flat ...

Mannering suddenly stopped thinking, and several seconds passed before his mind started to work normally again.

He had made the biggest mistake possible, had neglected a

course that should have been obvious from the start. The flat at Hare Court Mansions had been left vacant; he should have rented it early on the morning after Jackson had followed him there.

Kulper would have made inquiries, only to find he had been tricked.

In a state of real alarm, Mannering took a cab to the block of flats, and this time found a porter in attendance. He asked for a flat on the third floor, taking it for granted that the man would see nothing unusual in an inquiry about an empty but furnished flat at nine-thirty in the evening.

The porter, a large, bony man with a villainous squint and a mop of fiery red hair, seemed to find it normal enough.

“Third flaw—second—fust—”

“Well—the third, perhaps?”

“Ave a look at seventy-one,” said the porter glumly. “It’s bin empty six months, Gawd knows why. Fought I ’ad let it this artemnoon, but the cove turned it down.”

“A—a little too quiet, perhaps,” suggested Mannering.

“I should say. Everything was O.K. till he got inside, and then he turned it down flat.”

“Perhaps it was a friend of mine,” said Mr. Miller hesitantly, but his pulse was beating fast. “He told me he had seen some flats here. At least, I think it was here.”

“Wot’s he like?”

“Er—well, rather tall and stout. Usually dressed in green, I believe, and I suppose you would say red-faced.”

It was a rough description of Greene, and a moment later Mannering knew that he had been right; for the porter grinned.

“Strike me, I never thought he’d recomment us, sir. Can’t tell from appearances, can yer?—well, ’ere we are.”

Mannering hesitated, fussed around the flat, complained that it was very dear, but eventually took it, giving the name of Browning, and arranging to pay a month in advance. He was more worried after he left Hare Court than he had been before: Kulper had inquired, and would know by now that the Baron had tricked him.

There was also that photograph ...

He knew he would have to go to the billiard hall on Monday, and he could get help from no one. The temptation to ask Lake to go along was strong: but Kulper would not be easily deceived, and if Lake knew Mannering was the Baron it might do more damage than the photograph itself. The week-end was the worst Mannering had experienced for a long time.

There was nothing to cheer him up, although one thing would have amused him had things been running better. Peter Lake telephoned, spoke awkwardly, and finally asked for a loan of fifty pounds. He had been found guilty at Bow Street that morning, and Mrs. Gertrude Willison had refused to pay the fine and costs. Mannering promised a cheque, and Lake sounded appreciably happier.

Plender called at Clarges Street on the Sunday morning. He had been going through the defence with Hackett, and Hackett at the moment thought it was hopeless. Plender, of course, agreed with him. Young Halliwell had said nothing more, and Plender himself was beginning to think the youngster guilty.

Mannering found his temper on edge, and had to be careful not to snap at Plender.

"I'll lay you ten to one, Toby, that you'll get him off. We may even get the police to drop the prosecution."

"Hackett'll never forgive you if you do," said Plender, with his peculiar grin.

"Damn Hackett," grumbled Mannering. "The fellow seems to think he's infallible, and he's an arrogant devil."

Plender smiled.

"He asked me why the hell a fellow like you should set London by the ears, and he didn't seem impressed when I told him it was because of your looks. Joking apart, Hackett's sound and genuine. I wish I thought the same of Leverson."

"Go home and have lunch," said Mannering shortly. "I've got to get to Portland Place and there's no time for your pet aversions. I may have something for you on Tuesday, after tomorrow's inquest on Kingley."

"If you ask me," said Plender gloomily, "you're heading for

real trouble, John. But I can talk my head off and you'll keep working in your own way." He shook hands as they reached the street. "Be careful, old man."

Mannering walked to Portland Place gloomily. Plender had been more shrewd than he knew: Mannering, and the Baron, were heading for trouble. Even if the Monday meeting with Kulper went off all right, he had the Staines burglary on his hands. Three or four people would know he was in there, and more concerned with saving their skins than his, even if he did carry Eldred's gems in his pockets.

Moreover, he had no guarantee of freedom from Kulper's control if he did get away with Eldred's collection.

Mannering found the room above the billiard saloon was barely furnished, with a ring of hard wood chairs round the walls. Only Kulper was there when Mannering arrived. Kulper was sitting at his desk, with those wizened hands folded in front of him, and his single eye staring at Mannering, who had laid his hat, stick and gloves on the table and was now lighting a cigarette.

Kulper's voice was as expressionless as ever: it seemed, Mannering thought, like that of someone disembodied.

"You are cleverer, my friend, than I expected. You knew you would be followed, and you tricked my colleagues."

"I wasn't as clever as I should have been," said Mannering frankly. "I forgot to rent the flat the next morning."

Kulper shrugged his shoulders.

"It does not matter. It would have been annoying, I admit, had you not arrived today. I should have had to try to trace another photograph like the one Greene took, or else worry the police, a task I dislike intensely."

"Is it a good likeness?" asked Mannering.

Kulper's lip twitched as he took a photograph from his pocket, passing it across to Mannering. The Baron took it: and but for his extra care in negotiating with Kulper, he must have shown his surprise.

For the photograph was different from that which Kate

Loffatt had shown him!

In it he had the full cheeks, the dark lines; and the man could never have been taken for John Mannering. Kulper was far cleverer than the Baron had anticipated, and he blessed the visit to the Cat. Without it he would not have known there was a second and more damning photograph in circulation.

“No one else has seen this, I suppose?” It was a test question as he pushed the photograph back. Kulper lifted his hands.

“No one who might do harm to you, Baron. Only those members of my organisation who might have recognised you.”

Apparently the man did not make a practice of lying. That code again – the code that all men had.

“All right. Now—are you still thinking of that damned job at Staines?”

“I am thinking of it, my friend.” Kulper took a file of papers from a drawer in the desk. “Here are some things of interest, I know. A plan of the house, of the strong-room, and the passages leading to it. A description of the wiring, and the usual positioning of the guards. You will please yourself how you go, but I would advise you to go through the side entrance, and then get away by the river. I have arranged for a small craft to be near Eldred’s house the whole evening, and by shining a torch three times in quick succession, it will come to the landing-stage at the back of the house. You will be away in a very short time.”

Mannering took the file, trying to hide his surprise; but he allowed a gleam of real interest to show in his eyes.

“Plans, eh? How the devil—”

“Eldred employs servants, and servants are easy to handle,” said Kulper. “But the three guards are impossible to bribe, and you have an easy task *only* if you can outwit them, thus preventing an alarm. But even the Baron could not have made more perfect arrangements. You can rely absolutely on the information given there.”

Mannering nodded, folded the file and put it in his pocket.

“Is that the lot?”

“For now,” said Kulper, very slowly. “You understand the

terms, my friend? Half the proceeds for you, half for me, if you succeed. If you fail, it is entirely in your hands. You can afterwards tell the police my name and my address, but I assure you they will never find me. You will start at twelve o'clock, just half an hour after the household retires for the night. There is nothing of note happening there this evening, and things will go according to plan. Emmanuel Eldred, as a matter of fact, is a great man for plans, and I hope that it will prove his downfall. Tell me—do you think you can do it?"

Mannering hesitated: and then he nodded slowly.

"I think so. But you forgot part of the agreement, Kulper. If I succeed, I get the negatives back."

"Of course, of course. You get your negatives," said Kulper. He stood up slowly, gathering oddments from the desk in front of him. "It is now nearly three o'clock, and you have little enough time to prepare. Good luck, my friend."

He offered his hand. Mannering deliberated quickly, and then took it. It was hot and dry, somehow what he expected, but the grip was quite firm.

Twenty-five minutes after he had entered, Mannering left the Status Billiard Hall and walked rapidly towards Aldgate. He felt relieved, and yet he was uneasy because of Kulper's thoroughness. There was no possibility of manoeuvring for time, for getting out of the fix. He had no choice about Eldred's strong-room, and he hated the yoke.

By five o'clock the Baron was admitting a reluctant admiration at Kulper's efficiency. Nothing had been neglected, and Mannering, with his experience of following a plan, would be able to move about the Staines house without trouble. Even the major items of furniture that might have got in his way had been marked on the large scale drawings.

Mannering locked the papers in a drawer, and went into the bathroom. He proposed to leave by eight o'clock, and make up somewhere in Staines, probably at the railway station.

Above the running of the water came a sharp ring at the door bell. He half expected to see Lorna, and he had prepared a way of disarming her suspicions: but he had prepared nothing for

Chief-Inspector Bristow, who was standing outside.

Chapter Seventeen

The River House

“Hallo, Bill,” said John Mannering, and there was nothing in his smile to make Bristow suspicious of the thoughts in his mind. “I hardly expected you, but come in. How’re things?”

Bristow shook hands. Mannering was relieved when he smiled, for it suggested that the policeman was in friendly mood.

“Fair, fair, you know. They don’t alter much. Just going to bath?”

“I was, but there’s no hurry. Tea, or—”

“I’ve just had some, thanks.” Bristow sat down and accepted a cigarette. He was looking as spruce as ever, if a little tired about the eyes. “Well, Mannering, I’ve one or two questions.”

“Ask, and you may be told,” said Mannering.

“Perhaps,” said Bristow, in whom the power of repartee was not developed too strongly, “it’s about the Halliwell case.”

Mannering nodded.

“Your cut-and-dried affair, Bill? Sorry I couldn’t get to the inquest, but I don’t suppose it worried you. An adjournment, of course?”

Bristow nodded.

“Yes. Halliwell’s down for trial next month, and with a clear court, it will be fairly early. That key business isn’t important, Mannering, the marks might have been made by anyone. But Lynch put something up this morning, and it might make it awkward, for you.”

“For me? You can’t leave me out of it, can you?”

“You haven’t given us much chance in this job,” said Bristow bluntly. “Look here, Mannering, you’re the only man who can state that the key was found on the floor of the room. It means

you will have to give evidence—”

“I’m not scared of a criminal court yet, Bill Bristow.”

“You ought to be,” flashed Bristow. “But the fact that the key was on the floor doesn’t necessarily mean Halliwell didn’t lock the door. It suggests he threw the key down to make sure he couldn’t fall to a sudden temptation to turn it in the lock again, and get out. Suicides often make sure against a last-minute repentance.”

“Beautiful,” murmured Mannering. “An answer for everything, and Hackett will enjoy that point. You know he’s taking the case?”

“Yes, that’s why I’ve come. He wouldn’t take it if he didn’t feel there was a reasonable chance, and thought Halliwell was innocent. How did you persuade him?”

“Exactly as I did you.”

“Nothing else?”

“Excepting that I told him I thought I knew the man who had sealed up the room, but I’m no means sure.”

Bristow was looking grim again, and rubbing his moustache.

“Look here, Mannering, if you know anything, you ought to tell us. It’s—”

“I haven’t the slightest reason for passing my theories on to you,” said Mannering. “If I did, and you caught the man, what would he do? Seal himself up as well as he did the room, and swear he’d never been to the hotel. It would do more harm to Halliwell than anything else, particularly as the gentleman I have in mind would probably be able to fake an excellent alibi.”

“But, Mannering—”

“No ‘buts,’ Bill. I’m working it out myself.”

“You’re playing like a damned fool,” snapped Bristow angrily. “Look here, if you keep at it, you know what’s going to happen?”

Mannering’s eyes were mocking.

“Yes, Halliwell will get free.”

“Apart from that—especially *because* of that. You’re the biggest jewel-thief in England, and you take a big interest in Halliwell because someone else killed Kingley. It’s possible to

assume it's because you know who killed him, even if you weren't at the place yourself, and don't want an innocent man convicted. You see?"

Mannering did see.

He was telling himself that he had been blind in a dozen ways over this affair, that he had neglected yet another obvious angle. Of course, the police – perhaps not Bristow, but others – would suspect the Baron of doing just that. They would be prepared to believe that Kingley had been killed by the Baron, or through the Baron, who was fighting because of it.

His face was a little gaunt, his eyes very hard.

"I see. Bill. It's one of those things that make me glad I'm not a policeman, but you've forgotten one important thing. I'm not a jewel-thief. You may think I am, but you're wrong. Got it?"

"Oh, the old denials, but they won't serve you. Lynch is working round it this way—"

"But he sent you here, or you wouldn't say so."

Bristow was beginning to look uncomfortable.

"All right, he did. He wants to find just what you know, Mannering, and why you're sticking your nose into this business."

Mannering laughed sharply and without humour.

"I get you. If I talk, I'm the white-headed boy, and there's no need for me to worry. If I don't, you'll try and cook up something so that I find myself charged with complicity in the Kingley case. By doing that you'll have a good opportunity for innuendo with your blasted ideas that I'm the Baron, and you'll try to break me that way. All right, try. And I'll have Hackett on a malicious prosecution case that will ruin you, Lynch, and any other policeman who takes part in it. Now it's your turn to see."

Bristow rubbed his chin slowly.

"We-ell—I can't say I subscribe to the theory, Mannering. But it's possible. You're extremely anxious to clear Halliwell—"

"I've told you why, and the reason's true. Take it or leave it, Bill, and try and remember my message verbatim, for Lynch. Shall I write it down?"

"Now listen—"

"I've just remembered an appointment, and I need a quick bath," said Mannering shortly. "If you don't get off, I'll lose my temper and throw you out, and then you'd have a case for assault, but without a witness. Oh, don't argue, man!"

Bristow stood up, shrugging his shoulders. As he reached the door Mannering laughed and followed him, resting a hand on the Inspector's shoulder.

"Sorry, Bill. My tongue runs away with me, but it's your confounded blindness over the Halliwell job that's the trouble. I'll make you an offer."

Bristow looked relieved: for three years he had been trying to dislike John Mannering, and failing signally.

"What is it?"

"If I get what I want and can hand you Kingley's murderer, I'll do it. No reprisals on my own part. But just at the moment it would ruin the chances to let you in on anything."

Bristow eyed him steadily.

"Please yourself, Mannering. You're playing with fire, but you've done it before. So—"

"My thoughts exactly," said Mannering.

He felt depressed when Bristow had gone. The danger from the affair was worse than he had dreamed when he had started it. The police could be ruthless. They believed him to be the Baron, but if they could get him on another charge they would be satisfied.

The police on one side, Kulper on the other, and the link between them the photographs.

"Damn it all," said Mannering aloud as he lowered himself in the bath, "I'll be glad to get to Eldred's place. It'll be something to do. Next time I play Good Samaritan, it's going to have nothing to do with jewels."

He bathed quickly, and spent twenty minutes at Swedish drill with particular variations of his own, to get limbered up for the night's adventure. The rest of the affair was slowly fading from his mind; he made himself forget his anxiety, to get into the familiar buoyant mood of the Baron before a raid. He was the Baron, with the Baron's work to do. He needed all the zest he

could command, and there was fillip in the fact that he was attempting something that was almost impossible. He did not unduly stress the help of Kulper's plans and information, for had he been carrying the whole thing through on his own he would have made similar arrangements: the preparations had been done for him, but the job itself was the thing that mattered.

For that night the only thing.

With the same disguise as that which he had used for the burglary at Jackson's place, the Baron stood by the hedge bordering River House from the by-road that led to it. He was a shroudy figure in the shadows with his coat collar turned up and his hat pulled well down over his eyes. His tools were about his waist, the blue silk handkerchief in his pocket. He was wearing the rubber-tipped gloves that protected him against leaving finger-prints, while in a shoulder holster was his gas pistol, loaded with ether-gas – the only ammunition he used.

There was a slow ripple of sound, intensified by the silence. In the distance a car horn would sound occasionally, but about River House there was no noise but the slowly-flowing river. He could see it through the hedge, gleaming occasionally when the moon slipped between light billows of clouds.

From a nearby church tower midnight began to strike, sonorous and clear.

To the north a heavy bank of clouds was coming up, and Mannering was praying that they would not loosen when they reached this spot. He had no desire for the moon; with Eldred's careful guards about it might be dangerous.

Five minutes passed. Still no sound came, and the clouds were beginning to cover the moon, shutting off its silvery glow. No light was burning in River House, and still no sound came to disturb the silence.

Slowly the clouds moved across the sky, spreading strange darkness.

There was a faint glow about the countryside, but barely enough for the Baron to distinguish the gate or the shape of the house. It was just right for his purpose, and he went through a

gap in the hedge quickly. His heart was beating fast, his lips were parted as he reached a lawn bordering the house, and moved quickly towards the east side.

Emmanuel Eldred had built the place ten years before. It was not unduly large, and there were fifteen rooms on two floors. The entrance to the underground strong-room was at the end of the main passage hall, and near it one of the armed guards would be patrolling.

The east side held the drawing-room and dining-room. The best window, according to Kulper's plan, was that of the dining-room, for it was closer to the ground than any of the others. It was wired, but Mannering would have expected that in any case.

He moved quickly, reaching the window in twenty seconds, with the grass deadening every sound of his footsteps. The window was of solid construction, and the glass stopped a foot from the ground. Mannering slipped his mask over his mouth and chin, and the Baron stood there, silent, tense.

He took a small pair of thin-mawed pincers from his toolkit, and slipped it between the frame of the window, running it round slowly, cautiously. Every second he expected to feel the light touch of wire, but he found none. It meant that the wire was inside, and he would have to get the window open to find it.

He shone his torch, with a wide, flat-nosed glass, over the whole surface of the window, but saw no wire on the other side. Frowning, he took a roll of brown paper from his kit, specially prepared with a sticky surface for the operation. He unrolled part of it against the glass, to which it adhered, and cut it across; a piece nearly a foot square was ready for use.

Then he tapped sharply with a small rubber-headed hammer.

To his straining ears the sound seemed magnified out of all proportion, and he dodged back into the shadows. No other sound came, and after thirty seconds he believed that no alarm had been raised; he went forward, quickly but without a sound.

The paper came away easily, bringing with it several spiked pieces of glass. The window was shattered in the shape of a

large irregular star, and he lifted piece after piece out until there was room for him to climb through. According to the statements in the instructions, there was no outside patrol; the guards concentrated on the strong-room. There was no need to fear that the broken window would be seen by anyone passing by.

With the gap wide enough, he put his head and shoulders and one arm through. Keeping his balance by gripping the outside wall with his other hand, he groped for the wire. He dared not move quickly, for if he struck the wire sharply it would raise the alarm and the effort would be finished before it was properly started.

He found the alarm at last, his fingers touching it very lightly.

He shone his torch on the thin silver streak of the wire. In a flash he had severed it with the pincers, and then he had another nerve-racking period of waiting. Some wires gave the alarm when they were cut, as well as when they were being dragged: did Eldred's?

A minute was enough for him to assume that it did not. He climbed quickly through the window, and stepped across to the door leading to the hall. It was locked with a double-mortice, a brute of a thing to open, and he needed skeleton keys, for the key of the door was not in the lock.

He worked in the darkness, the only sound the scratching of the pick-lock on the hard metal. Time seemed to stand still, the ticking of his wrist-watch was very clear.

Click!

He had it back, but the noise seemed deafening. Cautiously he opened the door a fraction of an inch. There was no light inside, no sound. He widened the gap and stepped through.

The hall, like the drawing-room, was thickly carpeted, but that was against the Baron as much as for him: it silenced the approach of others as well as himself. Everything seemed quiet, no gleam of light shone.

The Baron stood with his back to the drawing-room door, took two paces forward, and then turned left. That should leave

him in the middle of the hall, and facing the passage leading to the strong-room. His eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, and he could make out the shape of the staircase that he had to pass. His right hand brushed against the hand-rail as he went forward, very slowly.

At the end of the passage were two steps, leading to a conservatory: Eldred had a passion for flowers as well as jewels, and the scent came strongly, a little sickly, in Mannering's nostrils. He reached the steps, knowing that at any moment one of the guards might reach the place. The only door of the strong-room led from it.

The Baron waited. He wanted the man to come now, as he stood back in the shadows. He had to overpower him before he could go further, and he wondered whether it would mean a scuffle, or whether he could make the passage silently.

Then, very abruptly through the silence, he heard the opening of a door. A gleam of light shone, and a man's figure snowed clearly in silhouette. He came unsuspectingly towards Mannering, and the Baron saw his right arm go out to switch on the light.

Mannering watched him, lynx-eyed.

The conservatory was flooded with light, and the Baron, crouching behind foliage and flowers, saw a tall, hard-faced man step forward, one hand in his pocket, the other carrying a truncheon. He was three yards from the Baron, and he came forward slowly, not warily, but by habit. Mannering spared no time for looking at the strong-room. He waited, with his gas-pistol poking through a gap in the foliage. The man would pass within a foot of him, and the ether-gas would daze him enough for Mannering's purpose.

Two yards – one.

Mannering's finger tightened on the trigger, and as it did so the guard turned, and the Baron looked straight into his eyes.

Chapter Eighteen

Strong-Room Underground

There was a slight hiss of the escaping ether gas, and Mannering saw the other's lips open, knew from the expression in a pair of startled eyes, that he had been seen. The man staggered, and Mannering pushed past a tub of flowering chrysanthemums in time to stop his victim from falling with a thud that might have raised an alarm.

His man was sagging against him, only semi-conscious: the Baron slipped a pad treated with chloroform from his pocket, and pressed it tightly over the open mouth and nose. The guard gasped and struggled spasmodically, and then went still.

Mannering half-carried and half-dragged him to a corner in the shadows, and propped him against the wall. It would be an hour before the guard would come round, and the feeling of uncertainty and doubt faded. The Baron was working and winning, the old tricks were succeeding, and the odds were reduced by a third. He ran his hands over the guard's clothes, finding two automatics and a black-jack, as well as the police truncheon.

Mr. Emmanuel Eldred did not propose to take the chance that his guards were under-armed, and Mannering knew that he had to be doubly careful: the guards would not worry whether their shooting had fatal effects or not, providing it stopped an intruder.

He found no keys, and confounded the fact as he stepped to the strong-room door. He left the light on for a few seconds, to examine the door more closely. It was a three-lock combination, by no means the most difficult obstacle the Baron had met, and the chances of getting through seemed rosier.

A glance at his watch as he went to switch off the light

showed him that it was twenty past twelve. Kulper's report indicated that the watchman was supposed to reach the conservatory at twelve-fifteen: Kulper's source of information was a reliable one, and Mannering was more than ever convinced that he could depend on it.

He had developed an uncanny ability to work in the darkness as effectively as in the light. He stood over the bottom combination twisting and turning, hearing the tumblers clicking. He forgot everything but the fact that he was breaking open a vault again. His subconscious mind was alert for the slightest sound as his fingers twisted and turned.

Once he thought he heard a rustle behind him, and swung round. He stood for a moment in the darkness, breathing heavily. Nothing moved, no sound came. A mouse, perhaps, or a rat, or even the falling of a branch of foliage. He turned back, and the next effort at the bottom lock forced it back.

He had carried the successful combination in his mind, and he tried it on the middle set of locks, without success. The same efforts followed, the same ceaseless turning, the same tension as he listened.

The middle lock clicked back, and he knew he was within sixty seconds of the first success.

The top lock was easier to get at than either of the others. He tried the two previous combinations, failed, and started again through the whole series. Darkness, silence broken by that faint clicking of tumblers, and the soft breathing of the Baron. His lips were parted, his eyes were glittering as the lock at last gave way.

The Baron stepped back a pace.

He glanced about him swiftly, seeing and hearing nothing, and then he took a thin file from his tool-kit, running it round the edge of the door. By the top lock he found a wire: the thin pincers came into operation again: and twice more, for there were wires by each lock.

Then he pulled slowly and cautiously at the door.

It was heavy, but it swung easily and without a sound. Beyond it was blackness. He knew there was a flight of steps,

widening at the bottom, where he would find another door, the final one. But somewhere between the top of the stairs and the second door were the remaining watchmen, and apparently they worked without a light.

That wasn't feasible. The Baron hesitated, listening intently, convinced now that the others had been alarmed and the light had been turned out because of it. He tried to pierce the gloom but failed, for he dared not use his torch; it would give him away in a moment.

Very slowly he stepped to the first stair, and then pulled the door behind him, so that it closed without locking. He felt along the walls, but there was nothing there to give him cover. Almost desperately his mind went back to the plans. There was the staircase, widening on each stair, until at the bottom it was six yards across. A wide passage, more of an ante-room to the vault than anything else, but nothing at all behind which he could take shelter.

He had to go back or go down, and he hardly thought of retreating as he stepped cautiously downwards, keeping close to the right-hand wall all the time. He had counted the fourth of twelve steps when he saw the flash of light below.

A brilliant white gleam shone straight up the middle of the stairs. It dazzled him for a moment, but as it began to move round he could see the reflected glow on the figure of the man holding the torch.

The beam was coming slowly towards him, perhaps a foot across. In another few seconds it would shine on him; the guard's suspicions had been aroused, and the moment was pregnant with danger.

The Baron drew a short, sharp breath, poised himself, and jumped!

It was the only thing he could do, for if he waited the guard at the bottom would start shooting the moment the torch revealed an intruder. He went smoothly through the air, hearing the man swear suddenly: and then they crashed into each other.

The Baron had his arms and legs wide, and he folded them about the guard. The torch clattered from the man's grasp and

went out. The Baron took a punch in the chest that made him gasp, and then they hit the ground, struggling furiously but with little sound. Mannering brought his right hand away quickly, groping for his pocket. He found the gas-pistol and drew it out, using his left hand all the time to prevent the man from shouting. Sharp teeth bit at his fingers once, but Mannering kept his hold, desperately though the other tried to loosen it.

Taking a deep breath and holding it, he touched the trigger.

The guard kept fighting for a few seconds, but the Baron kept pressing. The struggles grew weaker, and then stopped. Mannering used his chloroform pad again and then stood back, listening intently.

No sound came.

The third, guard should have been down here, according to the plan, but there was no sound or sign of him. The Baron was thinking fast, trying to find a reason, but failing. He was busy all the time, yet worried. How had this fellow been warned, and where was the other guard? It was reasonably certain he was not close at hand, or he would have joined in the fight.

The Baron's torch shone on the crumpled body of his second victim, a thick-set, big-boned man who would have had the better of the Baron in an even fight. The Baron smiled tensely behind his mask as he ran through the loaded pockets. Exactly the same armoury as with the first guard was revealed, and Mannering dumped it against the wall behind the body of the second unfortunate.

Where the devil was the third?

He turned his torch round slowly. It lit on nothing but the bare walls and, directly opposite the staircase, the door of the underground strong-room.

He had heard of that door before Kulper had given him the particulars. It was electrically operated and controlled by a switch upstairs, but somewhere below was another switch that could be used for emergency. Kulper had not known where that was, and the Baron did not propose to look for it, for he might have wasted half an hour without success. Instead he examined the wall by the door very closely.

It was painted over plaster, and in turn, he believed, over bricks. Somewhere beneath the plaster was the wire, carrying power to the door.

With a small chisel he scraped away the paint. The plaster surface showed clearly beneath the bright light of the torch, and he saw that at one point the plaster was slightly raised above the main surface. He ran his fingers along the wall, some two inches from the door, and satisfied himself that the raise was running straight from the floor to the top of the door.

It was the channel chased in the plaster where the wire had been run, and Mannering knew how to work at it, convinced he could get through. The one anxiety was the missing guard, but he dared not lose more time in looking for the man.

He took three pieces of a small brace from his tool-kit, and joined them together. The brace was strong if dumpy, and he fitted the thickest bit he was carrying into the mouth. Then he put the point a quarter of an inch from the side of the chased channel, and began to turn.

The slight burring sound echoed loudly through the silence. Mannering counted ten very slowly as he drilled, and then paused. No sound disturbed the silence. Another ten, another pause. The bit was biting well into the plaster, and he changed the position, drilling four holes about an inch apart, stopping only to listen for any other sound. Then he made two holes between each corner-piece, and when they were finished there was a small square of plaster separated from the rest by the holes made by the bit.

He dared not drill straight onto the wire, in case a shock travelled through the steel. The next manoeuvre had to be doubly careful. With a small cold chisel he knocked away the little square of plaster. It flaked and dropped down, but the tapping sound seemed to echo like a steam-hammer, and he paused every second, listening, on tenter-hooks.

Nothing happened.

He tapped again sharply, and as his chisel came away he saw what he wanted.

As he had expected, the wire was covered with lead tubing,

but it was within easy access. Mannering was smiling to himself, tensely and hopefully, and he replaced the brace and bit, with the chisel and small hammer, and drew a small tin from the kit.

It contained a strong corrosive acid, and the Baron took out the specially treated stopper gently, putting the neck of the tin against the lead covering. The acid flowed against it, and the Baron drew away.

There was nothing he could do for a few seconds, and he occupied the spare moments by looking about the hall, or ante-room. There were blank walls on all sides excepting where the staircase ran, and he was more puzzled than ever by the disappearance of the third guard. Three times he looked at his watch, waiting until a minute had passed. Then he took a hard ebonite stick from his tool-kit and turned back to the hole in the wall.

He used the ebonite stick much as a dentist would use a probe. The lead covering had been rotted by the acid, and beneath it the wire was easily broken. The current would not travel along the ebonite, and the risk of a shock was cancelled.

The wire was cut at last.

The Baron turned to the door, his eyes gleaming, his heart racing. There was a possibility that the door was locked by a key as well as by electricity, but the handle turned easily, and he pushed the door.

It began to open.

The last of the three big obstacles was past. If the third watchman had been with his fellows the Baron would have been sure of the ultimate success, but as he peered into the darkness of the strong-room he was prepared for a sudden attack.

Nothing moved inside, and he stepped in, closing the door behind him after making sure that the inside handle turned the locks as well as the outside one. With the door shut, he found the light switches just behind him.

There were three, and the first shed a dim glow about the strong-room, enough for the Baron. He saw the cases of jewels, locked and secure to all but a cracksman of first-class ability,

and there were several safes against the walls of a room perhaps twenty feet square.

Nothing else.

There was no thought in his mind then of Halliwell or Kulper. He was simply the Baron, working with a startling speed, every movement quick and decisive. With a screwdriver and a powerful pair of cutters he opened case after case. They contained smaller jewels from Eldred's collection, but when the glittering pile was on a small table in front of him, the Baron knew he had a fifty thousand pounds'-worth of jewels already.

The safes remained to yield up their contents. Should he open them, or should he call it a day?

The thought of Kulper, and the damage the man with a scar could do, made him work on. He pocketed the stones, and a glance at the safes showed him they were all made on the same principle. Only gelignite or dynamite or another explosive could open them, without an oxy-acetylene cutter.

Gelignite would be safe to use underground. He could go outside, after closing the door, and the sound would be confined to the strong-room. The brace-and-bit came into service again, and he drilled two holes in each safe, pouring acid in to weaken the resistance of the metal. The fourth safe finished, he scraped soft metal away, leaving a hole nearly two inches deep and wide.

Concentrated only on his job, he worked without ceasing for twenty minutes. There was then room for the gelignite, in each safe. He inserted it carefully, and then lit the fuses. All were three-minute trails, and he had ample time. He turned towards the door quickly, opened it, stepped outside and pushed the door. He half-turned—

Then he saw Kulper and Greene.

Both men were standing against the wall, both men held guns levelled towards the Baron. Kulper's face was expressionless, Greene's mocking and derisive. It was Greene who spoke hoarsely, while the Baron felt a white-hot fury burn in him.

"Thanks, Baron, you've done it just right for us. Reach for the

ceiling, and make it fast!”

Chapter Nineteen

Double-Cross

Mannering kept his hands a little in front of his waist, the fingers crooked and apart. His eyes were hard, and beneath the blue mask his face was gaunt. Greene's words faded into a silence that lasted less than twenty seconds although it seemed much longer.

Then Kulper spoke.

"You will be well advised, my friend, to obey."

Mannering turned his head towards him. In the first moment of the discovery he had been conscious of nothing but the shock, amazement at the realisation of a double-cross he had never suspected. Kulper 'always kept his word,' Kulper—

"Just tell me," said the Baron very slowly, and without moving from the spot a yard from the door, "what you propose to do, you foul little swine. I shouldn't use that gun, Greene, I've as many tricks in my hand as you, and they'll be a damned sight more effective." He was bluffing desperately, but the smile left Greene's face, and the man swore. Kulper took a short step forward, disturbed by the intensity of rage in the Baron's voice.

"Talking like that is useless, Baron. We want the jewels."

"You do, do you?" said the Baron, and there was an incredible derision in his voice, a contempt that made Greene swear again. "We agreed on a half-share, and we're sticking to it. Keep your gun still, Greene!"

He was trying to count the seconds as they flew by, but it was useless. He was waiting for one thing that could save him now, bluffing for three precious minutes. He could not keep Kulper at bay much longer, but he needed just those three minutes.

Kulper and Greene thought he had the jewels with him!

Greene hesitated. His gun kept up, and so did Kulper's, but they did not shoot. Kulper's voice seemed drier and thinner than ever.

"You've made a mistake, my friend. We might have given you a share of the proceeds, had you not gone to visit Mrs. Loffatt. No, no, she did not talk, but you were seen to enter her flat. And that means that you are interested in us, that you visited Jackson because of that interest, and not for small change. It alters the complexion of the affair, my friend. We followed you, and you can thank us, for we met one of the guards."

"Did you?" The Baron hardly knew what he was saying, he was only praying that the man would talk and keep on talking. "Well, what's next?"

"A regrettable accident," said Kulper. "I wish I could promise to leave you alive, but it would be far too dangerous. Such a craftsman as you will appreciate—"

Mannering took a half-step forward, and the two guns moved sharply. Neither were used, and Mannering realised they were scared of making a noise.

"I'm appreciating a lot of things," he said. His heart was thudding against his ribs, he felt dreadfully hot, and the words threatened to stick in his throat. He had never been strained to such a point in his life, and he was desperately anxious not to over-estimate the time that had passed. Any second now he would snatch the one chance that he needed, and he *had* to make use of it. "I'm learning who killed Kingley, who is putting Halliwell on the spot. You like double-crossing, don't you, Kulper? Well—"

Then it came.

A sudden, deafening roar that seemed to shake the very walls and floor of the ante-room. A crash as the door thudded to, a gust of wind that almost blew him off his feet. It did blow Kulper and Greene against the wall, for they had not been waiting for it with every muscle in their bodies tensed to withstand the shock.

The safes had blown.

As the roaring echoed like thunder in his ears, the Baron jumped forward. He had never felt so murderous, and his fists smashed out one after the other. Greene, rearing upwards, took a blow on the chin that sent his head back with a sickening crash against the wall, and Kulper, making a last-minute effort to dodge, took the Baron's left fist on the right cheek and the side of his nose. He flopped sideways with his eye still open, and Mannering brought his left round, cracking beneath the little man's chin.

Kulper did not groan, but he slid downwards.

As he went, and as the roaring of the explosions died away, other sounds came from the top of the stairs. A door opened, two figures appeared above, and came rushing down. The Baron glimpsed them as he bent down, hoisted Kulper's body over his shoulder, and straightened up.

He recognised neither of the newcomers, and he was not sure whether they were Eldred's men, or Kulper's. It made little difference. He crouched back against the wall as they tore downwards, looking neither right nor left and worrying only about the inside of the strong-room. As they reached the bottom stair, Mannering's leg shot out. One man hit against it and went sprawling, the other half-turned.

His mouth, gaping open, was less than an inch from the Baron's gas-pistol. There was a slight hiss of escaping gas, and as the man staggered back, the Baron hit him hard, in the middle of the stomach. He was using his right arm and fist, his left was holding the unconscious Kulper like a leech.

The first-comer still on the floor, was grabbing at Mannering's ankles. Mannering side-stepped, bent down and caught a glimpse of a terror-stricken face as he tossed his gun into the air, catching it by the barrel. The butt of it cracked against the man's temple with a sharp snap.

Mannering did not wait to see whether it had made him unconscious or not. The whole house would be roused by now, and he had to get away. To be caught there meant the finish of him, and he was feeling bleak, desperate, almost despairing. He clung to Kulper as he rushed up the stairs, thankful for the light

in the conservatory. He saw the hanging flowers without thinking of them, although the blaze of colour beneath the bright light was a thing of rare beauty. He reached the top and the open door.

Three or four men were coming along the passage, dressed in pyjamas and dressing-gowns, bleary-eyed and all carrying sticks or pokers. As the Baron came in sight they stopped, alarm showing on their faces as they huddled closer together.

They did not move.

Mannerling's head was like a furnace, and for a moment he did not understand their attitude. They were four to one, they could get him easily. They—

He had forgotten the gun in his right hand! They did not know it only carried a single remaining charge of ether-gas that would be useless at the distance of five yards. If they decided on a concerted rush they would soon discover the truth, and he would lose his chance.

He hardly recognised his own voice.

“Get back against the wall—all one side. Move quickly!”

He lifted his gun, and he saw that they were scared out of their wits. They crowded backwards like a lot of sheep, and Mannerling was breathing heavily, not knowing the deadliness of his voice.

“Drop your sticks—fast!”

The heavy walking sticks and two-knobbed pokers clattered to the floor.

“Now move an inch, and I'll drill the lot of you.”

The Baron spoke as he began to move forward, slowly at first, and wishing he was not burdened with Kulper's body, although he knew it was as essential to get the man away as it was to escape himself. The front door, heavily barred and bolted, was nearest to him. The drawing-room window was open and he could get through it in a few seconds; fumbling for unfamiliar chains and bolts he might lose precious seconds. Already there were other voices crying out from upstairs and as he moved for the drawing-room he caught a glimpse of a tall, lean, bearded man at the top, with a blunderbus in his hand.

Eldred himself.

The Baron leapt forward.

He reached the door and flung it open, as the roar of a shot came from behind him. Pellets hit against the wall and the door, but he was in the drawing-room and he crashed the door shut. A chair was standing nearby and he swung it towards the door, pushing it under the handle. As it went a crash thudded on the other side.

Eldred's voice was raised clear and incisive: "Get into the grounds—watch the gates!"

Footsteps thudded as the Baron tore across the room to the window. He swung Kulper out first, feet foremost, and then joined him, hoisting him up again. The faint glow of the moon through light clouds made the grounds of River House look weird and distant, while from the front he saw the white light as the main door was flung open and the hall light shone into the grounds.

With Kulper, he stood no chance of getting to the gates before the men, who would all be armed. Eldred would lend them the courage they had lacked by themselves. The Baron might have reached the gates had he been free to run, but he had to take Kulper, for if Kulper were caught those photographs would be shown, and the Baron's career would be over.

Mannerling swung right, towards the river.

As he turned the moon broke from the clouds, and he could see the silvery surface of the water. On the far side were two or three bungalows with gardens leading down to the water. Kulper had a boat about here, but Kulper might not have told the truth, and for once the Baron prayed that he had not.

The moon was a blessing now, for he could see the path clearly; there was no danger of tripping over unseen obstacles. There was no hue and cry behind him, although he could hear excited voices, and footsteps echoed on the gravel drive.

Running hard, with Kulper slung fireman-fashion over his shoulder, he reached the lawn that sloped down to the river. In the translucent light of the moon he could see a small landing stage, and a launch and two small boats tied up.

As he saw them he heard a bellow from the house, and a clear voice echoed shrilly: "He's there—the river!"

Other voices took up the cry, and in a second the thudding footsteps seemed dangerously close. He went onwards, breathing hard, sweating as he had never sweated in his life before.

As he reached the landing stage he almost stumbled, and a precious second was lost as he recovered his balance. A glance behind showed him five figures streaming towards him, the nearest man less than fifty yards away.

Not more than ten seconds were available in which to work.

Mannering threw Kulper into the nearest boat, a cockleshell that swayed perilously on the high tide. He forced himself to move steadily, took a chisel from his tool-kit, and bent over the tie-ropes of the launch and the other dinghy. It would have been madness to try to use the launch, for he had no knowledge of the engine and he would lose vital time in getting it going.

The chisel cut through the rope quickly, but the pursuers were less than thirty yards away. He could see one of them with the blunderbuss, but the man was at the end of the string; and the Baron knew he had a few seconds left to work.

He slashed at the second dinghy's rope, without completely severing it, and then stepped into the first dinghy. Again the chisel slashed two or three times, and the rope parted. The first man was almost within reach, and he flung a walking stick towards the Baron. It sailed over Mannering's head as the dinghy swung round in the tide, and began to move away. Mannering pushed with his right foot against the landing stage, almost over-balanced but managed to keep the boat upright.

There were five yards between him and the water's edge.

Another racing figure slowed down, but the man slipped in his haste, crashing into the first-comer. The Baron saw him falling, and heard the splash as they hit the water. It showered up, over the Baron and over the men behind, but the fellow with the blunderbuss was busy; a flare of yellow light and the roar of a shot came almost simultaneously. Pellets splashed into the sides of the boat and the water, but the shot had been too

low for serious damage.

Mannering was treading on Kulper's body as he sat down and unshipped the oars. He forced himself to make every movement deliberate, spending precious seconds rather than losing an oar in his haste. Another roar, and the pellets whistled over his head.

He was ten yards from the bank.

To the right was a dark shadow over the water, cast by a row of tall trees growing close to the river's edge. It was fifty yards away, and the tide was flowing towards it. The Baron bent his back, pushing the oars well in and taking his first, long-considered stroke.

The dinghy, helped by a fast tide, seemed to leap through the water, and the third shot was well behind him. Another stroke – a third, a fourth.

He was in the shadows.

He kept pulling steadily, glancing over his shoulder all the time. By the edge two men were standing upright, others were bending down to drag the unfortunates from the river. The launch was a long way downstream, and the second dinghy had gone out of sight, after breaking its moorings. Eldred's men could not give chase, and the Baron had twenty yards or more to spare. But he bent quickly to the oars, pulling steadily, sweeping downstream.

There was a yelling and shouting behind him, and three times in quick succession came the noise of a blunderbuss: there were two or three in use, Mannering fancied. The shots were not directed towards the river but in the air, calculated to raise an alarm.

On the opposite side of the river lights were springing up in the bungalows, casting a dozen yellow glares over the waters. The moon slipped again behind a cloud, and darkness seemed to grow more intense, emphasised by the window lights. For the first time Mannering was able to pause and reckon his direction.

He had turned right from Eldred's garden, which meant he was going towards Staines and London. There were a dozen landing places farther down the river, and probably a car he

could beg, borrow or steal within reach. Despite this, the odds still seemed too heavy; for the first time the Baron had no prepared way of escape. His own car – an Austin registered in an assumed name and from an accommodation address – was parked near Eldred's house, where he could never reach it.

He had to trust to luck and his wits, yet the escape from the house and Kulper's double-cross gave him hope. There was a taut smile on his face as he pulled hard, manoeuvring for mid-stream.

Then, very suddenly, a light flashed out near him. For the first time he heard the muffled chug of the engine of a motor-launch. He saw it suddenly, a vague dark shape coming towards him slowly.

No ordinary craft would be abroad at that time of night. Was it Kulper's boat?

Then, very softly, a word came across the waters, and the Baron stopped rowing, startled and incredulous.

"Mannering!" The voice came again, in a whisper that he could hardly hear. "Mannering—is that you?"

Chapter Twenty

The Cat Again

Someone was there who knew the Baron as Mannering. Was it a friend, or was it a ruse to get him to forget his caution? He could not be sure, but he knew he would have to take a chance. As he shipped his oars he tried to pierce the darkness. For once he confounded the moon, although it had helped him to get away when escape otherwise would have been impossible.

“Who’s there?”

His own voice was ghostly over the water, hardly audible above the *chug-chug* of the engine. He waited tensely, and then the other man spoke more clearly, and he recognised the voice.

“Leverson. Are you all right?”

“Yes.” Mannering did not try to ask questions, but as the launch slowed down, he pulled towards it. Flick Leverson was standing by the engine, and there was someone else in the stern; a woman.

“Lorna!” The name broke from Mannering’s lips, but a moment afterwards he knew that he was wrong. It was not Lorna: it was Kate Loffatt.

Her voice held a mocking note as the Baron’s dinghy came alongside, and she dropped a rope over the bows.

“Nossir, wrong this time. Who’s that lady?”

“Quiet, for heaven’s sake,” snapped Leverson, and Mannering could see his shadowy form. “Get in quickly, Mannering, the police will have been warned by now, and we passed a river patrol further up.”

“Hold it,” said Mannering. “Kate, take his collar—”

He hoisted Kulper up, gripping him about the thighs, and the Cat hesitated for a second, her face showing her astonishment even in the shadows. Leverson exclaimed: “What the devil’s

that?" Mannering chuckled a little hoarsely.

"Friend Kulper, sleeping well."

The woman acted quickly. She gripped Kulper's collar and hauled him on board the launch, without any apparent effort. The Baron steadied the dinghy, gripped the rope and climbed up. As soon as he was on board Leverson swung the launch round in a sharp half-circle, so that it headed for Staines and London.

"Good man, Flick—"

"No wonder," said the Cat in a voice holding nothing but admiration, "they reckoned you were clever, Baron boy. Kulper over your shoulder—oh, my God! Can I smoke, Flick?"

"You can't!"

"Well, we'll have a drink on it," said the Cat.

She took a flask from the top of her stocking, and handed it to the Baron, snapping at him when he started to say: "You first." Mannering pulled his scarf down from his chin so that it hung loosely about his neck, and took a liberal swig at the whisky. The fiery spirit warmed and cheered him, and he watched the Cat toss her head back and swallow.

"Flick—"

"No, thanks, and for God's sake keep quiet!"

For the first time in the Baron's experience Flick Leverson was on edge, and Mannering knew that there must be a good reason for it. Leverson was afraid that they would meet trouble, and he sobered up considerably. The effect of his escape and then his rescue had been exhilarating, but it would have been madness to have made a careless move now.

"Touchy, isn't he?" asked the Cat. "There's a seat here, take it."

The Baron sat down at the side of the boat. She sat opposite him, with Kulper in between, and Leverson stood by the tiller, trying to search the darkness as the launch sped along, spewing a long wake behind it and making a stuttering noise that must have been heard and cursed by hundreds as it swung under Staines Bridge. The Cat seemed tense, even in the shadows. She was staring over her shoulder, and Mannering guessed that they

had passed the police patrol boat near here.

Leverson's voice came, snowing deep relief.

"It's tied up."

"Good God, can you see it?" exclaimed Mannering.

"It's by that lamp over there."

The Baron could see a single lamp, just below the bridge, and the cutter that was tied up to a landing stage near it. The Cat laughed very softly.

"He can see better than a cat, Baron boy. What about putting a scarf round the Big Shot? He might wake up."

Mannering looked down at Kulper. The man's lips were gaping open, but his eyes were still closed. It was an idea worth following, and he tied the scarf about the little crook's neck, then used Kulper's tie to fasten his hands behind him. Kulper moved sluggishly as Mannering worked, and the Cat's laugh came, eerie and unexpected, as the launch made twenty knots down river. Leverson was peering tensely for any craft that might be in front of them.

Mannering wondered whether the river police had been advised of the escape. Once they had, and the patrol cutters took to the water, it would be almost impossible to get through. He was suddenly afraid again of what might happen, but the Cat's laugh jerked him out of his fears. He stared up at her, his eyes appreciative. Now he could just make out the brightly-coloured mackintosh she was wearing, and the beret over her thick, yellow hair.

"Something funny?"

"You put them out for a long time," said the Cat, and he was not sure whether she was amused or whether she was mocking him. Still there was no sound of pursuit, no suggestion that there was any other craft on the river. His mind was flooded with a hundred questions, and he stopped himself from pouring them out in a sharp succession. It was Leverson who spoke next, his tension easing a little.

"We're past Chertsey and there's a car at Walton. We'll make it with a little luck."

"A little?" inquired the Cat, her eyes on Mannering. The

moon came out suddenly, shining fully on her, and the light softened her harshness. It made her look lovely, wraith-like. "You're not a man for questions, Baron boy."

"There hasn't been much time," said the Baron. "But how—" Levenson broke in as the woman laughed softly.

"You can thank the Cat, Mannering. Greene told her how they proposed to work tonight, and she took a liking to you the other day. She saw Rummell, knowing he'd sent you to her, and Rummell put her in touch with me. We've worked together before. We didn't discover what had happened until ten o'clock, and you'd left your flat. Kulper had two or three men outside the River House, to make sure that you didn't escape that way, but he apparently ignored the river—"

"More likely the crowd scared them. I didn't come away unattended."

"We heard your friends," murmured the Cat. "You look after the ship, Skipper." She was smiling at Mannering, and she looked devilish attractive, with her big teeth parted a little, and her head thrown back. "Flick got busy, had the launch sent up from Aldgate, and we travelled here by car. He hasn't had much rest, brother."

"No—o." Mannering tried to say thanks, but found the words sticking in his throat. "I fancy it's lucky I called on you on Friday."

"Maybe. Greene wouldn't have realised your little game if you hadn't; he was watching the house and saw you come in, that's what spilled it."

"What did he ask you?"

"What you wanted to know. I told him I refused to talk, and was going to call him up." She swore. "I didn't come because of your eyes, Baron boy, but I promised you I wouldn't talk, and in a way I reckon I had to come. So I went after Rummell. Lucky you've got friends like Flick."

"Damned lucky," admitted the Baron. He looked about him, over the deserted river. The trees by the water's edge showed up very clearly in the bright light of the moon, and here and there they passed a field where cattle were standing, still and

statuesque. Silence seemed to be all about them excepting in the engine of the launch.

The Baron felt elated, even light-hearted.

He would not have escaped without Leverson and the Cat: or the chances of success would have been negligible. Now they were with him, a fast car was waiting within a couple of miles of the point where the launch cut through the Thames, and the odds were in his favour.

Leverson was slowing down a little.

"Watch the right bank," he said. "There are two cars, both with rear-lights on, and close together. I'm not using the search-light."

Mannering turned. The Cat stepped across the boat, and knelt on the seat next to him. He could feel the pressure of her warm arm and legs, deliberately close, but he ignored it. The moonlight over the fields and the river bank was gentle, but there were no cars in sight.

The launch turned a bend gently, and then the Baron felt his knee gripped by fingers with a surprising strength.

"See 'em, Baron?"

His heart leapt when he caught sight of the two small points of red, on the opposite bank. Up and down the river there was not a sign of another craft, excepting a small houseboat anchored close to the bank. Leverson pushed the tiller over and the launch moved cleanly round, its nose towards the bank.

"We'll use your dinghy, John." Leverson seemed more settled now, and Mannering leaned over the side, pulling the dinghy close. The Cat nodded towards Kulper, and Mannering lifted him into the cockle-shell. At the same moment he heard a splash of oars from the right.

Alarm flooded through him, but Leverson spoke quickly and settled the fears.

"It's all right—my man's coming out to take the launch. He'll bring me over, while you get to land."

"Room for me?" asked the Cat.

Mannering felt a little uncomfortable, after her previous invitation and the fact that he virtually owed her his freedom. It

was something unusual for him to feel awkward with a woman, and he covered it with a quick smile.

“Plenty—up in the bows, if you will.”

The dinghy swayed as the Cat climbed down and stepped over Kulper’s body. Mannering joined her, unshipping the oars, and pushed off against the side of the launch, which was turning slowly, some twenty yards out. He pulled easily towards the shore, with his back to the Cat as her low rich contralto came:

“Easy, we’re there.”

He lifted his oars as the keel grounded against the mud. Another figure waded knee deep through the water, and offered the Cat a hand. She shook her head.

“Take Kulper.”

The man in thigh-high waders leaned over and lifted the unconscious crook out of the boat. Mannering heard the woman laugh, saw her head a little on one side and looking at him mockingly.

“You’ll have to get wet, maybe you can carry me?”

“It’ll be a job,” retorted the Baron.

He lifted her off her feet quickly, and stepped over the bows clumsily but keeping his balance. The Cat did not move in his arms until he reached the bank, and then very deliberately she pressed her lips against his.

“I’ve got to get something,” she said, and laughed when she lifted her head away, and the Baron put her down. He was taking cigarettes out of his pocket, without making any effort to get the water out of his shoes and trousers.

“I don’t know whether I’m safer here, or back at Eldred’s,” he said as she took a cigarette.

“Think I’m dangerous?”

“Sure of it. Eldred’s was safer, probably, but I’ll chance it. Other things apart, I’m damnably grateful.”

“But you don’t want to pay too much for it, eh?” She was laughing at him, and in that light she was overpoweringly good to look at. The Baron deliberately turned towards the launch, saw Leverson climbing into another boat, and sat on the

running board of the larger car, to squeeze the water from his trousers.

"The Baron," he said, "has some morals. Taking a lot and giving a little is included. But supposing we defer the argument?"

"Maybe," said the Cat lightly, "you'll ask Lady Lorna's permission."

"She's like you," said the Baron, "very broad-minded. Joking apart, Kate—"

"Again? "

"Damn you," said the Baron, and he was relieved when Leverson appeared.

There was still no sound or sign of pursuit, and the Baron climbed into the larger car. Leverson sat at the back with Kulper. The Cat sat next to Mannering, leaning back and smoking. As Mannering let in the clutch and eased off the brakes, sending the car forward, he was conscious of her steady gaze.

"Left or right?"

"Left." It was Leverson. "Then right at the cross-roads, first left, and you're on the Kingston Road. You'll know it from there."

"Thanks," said Mannering.

There was no need for him to ask what the other men were doing. They would put the launch safely into anchorage, and then get back to town in the second car. Leverson had left nothing to chance, and as the Austin turned into the main road he saw two other late motorists in the distance, their powerful headlights dimmed a little by the brilliant moon. He felt really safe for the first time. In his pocket he had a handful or more of Eldred's diamonds: and at his side was Kate Loffatt, who was a little more than the Baron had expected, and who might do incalculable things. He hoped there would be no trouble with her, but he was worried by the steady regard with which she watched him, and he pressed hard on the accelerator.

A small fortune in stones, Kulper a prisoner, Greene and perhaps others of Kulper's men in the hands of the police by

now, at Eldred's house. Against that the Baron had been seen, and the Yard would learn of it soon. The old hue and cry would start, the Baron would be able to do nothing without first dodging the police, and there was more than his freedom hanging on it this time: there was Brian Halliwell's life.

Well, he might get what he wanted from Kulper.

The Cat had said that Kulper had denied murdering Kingley. That might have been the truth, although he would set less store on the truthfulness of Kulper in the future. Whether he forced a confession or merely obtained more facts to work on hardly mattered at the moment. He had to make sure that the police could not get him for the River House burglary, before anything else.

It was all in the game.

He had known he would stand a chance of losing against them, and he was prepared to trust his wits to beat the police. He had managed it before, sometimes with luck and sometimes because it had been on the cards: but this time there was something that he could not fight against, *if* they were put in operation against him.

The photographs.

Kulper would have the negatives, but were there other prints available? Could Greene give one to the police? If he could, thought Mannerling, there was only one thing to do: get out of the country as fast as possible.

He drove silently, without speaking, his chin set and his eyes narrowed. The Cat was forgotten in the knowledge of the emergency that might face him, and he was desperately anxious to talk to Kulper.

Chapter Twenty-One

Hue and Cry

Mannering made for London through Putney and Fulham, and as Leverson's Austin Six ran along New King's Road, the Cat broke a silence that had lasted for twenty minutes.

"What's in your mind, Baron?"

Mannering hesitated: he knew what she was thinking, and he did not want to accept her unspoken invitation. He was reluctant to offend the Cat in any way. Although Leverson had called him Mannering several times, and the woman must know his real name, she studiously refrained from using it. Yet he was worried; it was no time for risking the reactions of a woman scorned.

The Cat laughed at his hesitation, and Leverson leaned over the back of the seats.

"We must have somewhere to keep Kulper. Your flat won't do, Kate. When the police find Greene they'll go to you immediately they know you're acquainted. You'd better get out here, and walk to Lee Street from the end of Wandsworth Bridge Road. You're not likely to be seen."

"We can't risk that," protested Mannering quickly.

The Cat patted his knee.

"Don't get worried, Sir Galahad, I'm used to night jaunts, and I'll make it. The next turning on the right, there's a boy." She paused as Mannering saw the turning and went towards it, and then spoke sharply to Leverson. "Do I know where you're taking Kulper?"

"Benny's place, I hope."

"I'll be seeing you," she said. "Don't get out."

She opened the door quickly, and was in the road before Mannering could move from the wheel. Under a street lamp he

saw the flash of red lips and white teeth. Then she turned and was walking quickly away from the main road, swaying from the hips. Leverson sounded amused.

"Don't worry about her, John."

"The woman scorned," said Mannering thoughtfully.

"She's a philosopher in her way, and she'll try again, but she won't hold anything against you. But don't try to pay her for tonight's show in hard cash. That might make her scratch."

"Well, well!" exclaimed Mannering. "I'm getting an education in earnest these days. So she won't take money."

"Not from you, when she's offered her services. I like Kate," added Leverson frankly, "but I know her tricks. Now let's forget her. You've heard of Benny's place?"

"It's a pub near you, isn't it?"

"Yes, a couple of hundred yards from Wine Street. I spoke to Benny at the Unicorn before I came out, and he'll be waiting. But I didn't realise that you'd have company, and he might not like keeping Kulper. If he doesn't we'll have to try to find someone else."

"What made you talk to Benny?"

"You'll need somewhere to change, and it isn't wise to go to Wine Street."

Mannering nodded, satisfied, and they did not speak again as they drove through the deserted streets of London. Leverson had neglected nothing, and the more the Baron thought round the situation the more he appreciated the luck that had been with him, and the value of his friendship with Leverson. He wondered whether the fence was right in attributing the Cat's interest to the fact that she had promised silence but had been forced to break it, or whether she was personally interested in the Baron, as Mannering.

They reached Aldgate an hour after leaving the launch. Mannering's feet were still cold and damp, and he was looking forward to a change. It would be damnable if Benny should refuse to look after Kulper for twenty-four hours, for the scar-faced crook had to be left somewhere within easy distance, safe both from the police and his own associates.

There was no light burning at the Unicorn, on the corner of Aldgate High Street and a small alley that led to Wine Street in one direction, and Middlesex Street in another. There seemed no one about, and Mannering looked wearily at the dark windows of the public-house.

Leverson reached the side door, and opened it with a key.

“Fetch Kulper, quickly.”

Suddenly light-hearted, Mannering turned round. First making sure that no one was in sight, he lifted Kulper’s body from the floor of the car. Leverson held the pub door open, and for the first time Mannering saw a glow of light at the end of the passage.

The door closed, and as the lock clicked a coarse Cockney voice came sharply through the silence.

“What’s that? A stiff?”

“I hope not,” said Leverson, and against the light Mannering could see the silhouette of the man Benny.

Benny Lesser was a thin, spidery man, with a gaunt face and a lantern jaw. He was always chewing, and as he turned and led the way to the room at the end of the passage the Baron could see his jaws moving steadily. He made no comment, until Mannering let Kulper down into an easy chair, and sat on the edge of it.

A pair of bright brown eyes seemed to search him through. Benny Lesser pushed the chewing gum or tobacco from one cheek to the other, and spat into the fireplace.

“Who’s the yob, Flick?”

“A friend of mine,” said Leverson, and Mannering needed no more telling that the fence was quite capable of handling the situation. Leverson simply took a wallet from his pocket and began to take out pound notes. “Recognise the little man, Benny?”

“Nope.”

“I want you to look after him for a couple of days.”

“Is ’e ’ot?” asked Benny, shifting the cud and spitting again. The little room which served as a back parlour was squalid, and furnished at least twenty years behind the times.

“Hot as can be,” admitted Leverson frankly. “He’s been down to Eldred’s house, at Staines, and I want to talk with him later.”

“Now listen, Flick, you know as ’ow I don’t touch the ’ot ’uns. It ain’t worth the risk—”

“This one is,” said Leverson. He pushed notes into the man’s hand, and turned round as though everything was signed and settled. Mannering, trying not to interest himself too much in the negotiations between the two, had been feeling Kulper’s pulse. It was beating faintly, and he knew the little crook would need attention soon. His head had smashed against the wall of the anteroom, and blood had matted his hair.

“Where shall I put him?” Leverson went on calmly.

“In the hattic, I s’pose, but it ain’t right,” grumbled Benny, while Mannering tried to hide a smile of relief. “I ain’t been on the wrong side for ten years, Flick, an’ if yer git me up for a stretch—”

“You’ll be all right,” said Leverson. “We’ll have him out before the police think of looking here.” He turned towards the door opposite that through which they had entered, and winked at the Baron. “Straight up. There’s a single room on the top floor, good enough for him, I reckon.”

Mannering nodded. He was feeling tired, and for a moment he had difficulty in getting his muscles together and lifting the man. He started unsteadily towards the door, and surprisingly Benny stepped forward.

“Ere, gimme.”

Mannering relinquished his burden gladly. With Leverson he followed the spidery Benny up the stairs, and was astonished by the ease with which the little innkeeper tackled Kulper’s weight. Once they were in the attic, a long narrow room converted from a loft, Benny turned, spat once into a corner, and went downstairs.

“Let yerselves art,” he said. “I gotta be up at six, I ’ave. So long, mate.”

Mannering smiled, and offered his hand. Benny’s grip was unexpectedly firm, and for the first time a grin followed a scowl.

“O.K., Boss.”

“Thanks a lot,” said Mannering.

“You don’t ’ave to worry, the dicks won’t find ’im ’ere.” Benny nodded and shuffled out of the room, as Leverson stepped to Kulper’s side.

“You’ll find some tennis shoes in the corner, John, but I can’t run to trousers. I’ll look after Kulper while you get cleaned up and off. You’ll ring me in the morning?”

Mannering hesitated.

“Ye-es. Unless it gets too hot. Flick. If Greene can find one of those photographs, I’m through.”

Leverson stared.

Mannering realised that the other had not considered that possibility. He had known the Baron outwit Bristow a dozen times, and there was a compliment in his assumption that the cracksman could do it again, but that photograph was damning evidence.

“Damn it, Mannering, that’s a swine!”

Mannering forced a smile he did not feel.

“I’ll get to my Barnes place. There’s plenty of stuff there for a disguise, and I can watch events from there. You’re sure of Benny?”

“Ye-es,” Leverson said.

Mannering detected a note of doubt, but he did not enlarge on it. There would be time to worry about that in the morning, after he learned what Greene had reported to the police. It did not occur to him that the florid-faced crook might have escaped.

“Fine,” he said with forced heartiness. “We’re doing well, Flick, but who’s going to look after the loot?” He quizzed the other as he pulled several stones from his pocket and Leverson smiled in spite of his gravity.

“You don’t miss much, John! I’ll cover it—how much did you collect?”

“A pocketful,” said Mannering, suddenly cheerful again. He emptied his pockets of the stones from Eldred’s vault, knowing that Leverson would pay well for all of them: Leverson was one of the most trustworthy men of his acquaintance. Then, fifteen

minutes after he had entered the Unicorn, he climbed back into the Austin. Levenson was going to walk home, a matter of two hundred yards.

At Lune's, an all-night garage near Piccadilly, Mannering – still slightly disguised, and reasonably sure that he would not be recognised – garaged the car under complaint, and hired a Morris Ten in exchange. He felt reasonably cheerful but extremely tired when he reached Lanchester Street, Barnes, and after putting the car in the garage at the side of the house he let himself in with a key. Moving as silently as possible, in order not to disturb his housekeeper, he left a note on the hall table to say that he was in, and asking for a call at nine o'clock. Then he locked himself in the room.

He was no longer the Baron, nor John Mannering: he was Mr. James L. Miller, that commercial traveller of Barnes. But as he dropped asleep quickly, from sheer fatigue, he wondered whether Mannering or the Baron would ever appear again. What would Greene say? What evidence could he offer?

At a quarter past two Mannering was asleep. At a quarter past eight he awakened, with a heavy head, and tired eyes. He forced himself to look at the small clock on the table by his bed, scowled, grunted, and jerked himself to a sitting position. His head was thumping hard, a blinding pain ran across his eyes.

Before he dared call his housekeeper, he had to make-up as Miller. In a locked drawer in his dressing table was a case containing all that he needed by way of disguise. Hardly able to keep his eyes open, Mannering made up, using the cheek pads and the rubber covering for his teeth. In ten minutes he was presentable enough, and he rang for Mrs. Lloyd.

She came promptly, as she always did.

A tall, angular woman who had more than a trace of Victorianism, she seemed to disapprove of her middle-aged employer, and she had never made the slightest attempt at conversation. Mannering had rarely been more glad of her silence.

"Morning, Mrs. Lloyd. Coffee, black and hot, please."

“Very good, sir.”

“And put it on the table please, I’m going to have a bath,” said Mannering.

“I’ve put the towels out, sir.”

Mannering nodded, clutched a dressing-gown about him – he kept a full wardrobe at the Barnes house – and took a quick, cold bath. It refreshed him a little, but he disliked using greasepaint again.

When he reached the bedroom the coffee was on a tray, and next to it the *Daily Wire*, neatly folded.

Mannering stared at the paper, resisted the temptation to open it before he had taken coffee, and took the drink as black as he could. It was hot and strong, and it did him good. He munched a biscuit, followed with two aspirins and another cup of coffee, and then stretched out a steady hand for the *Wire*.

What story would the Press run?

He opened it out to the front page slowly, his heart thumping. Above all things he dreaded to see a photograph like that which the Cat had shown him. If Greene had one and had given it to the police, it would be there.

He saw a photograph, and his heart dropped sickeningly.

Then he saw that it was of Greene. The florid-faced man was wearing his pork-pie hat, and smiling: obviously it had been taken before the River House burglary, and the reporters had managed to get it from his flat.

Breathing more easily and smiling a little, Mannering paid fuller attention to the headlines.

He had expected their text, and his guess had been a good one. Stretched across the front page were letters an inch deep:

“THE BARON’S £50,000 HAUL”

and below:

“DARING ROBBERY AT STAINES “ACCOMPLICE CAUGHT

“The jewel-thief known widely as the Baron carried out the most daring theft of his career at the house of Mr.

Emmanuel Eldred, at Staines, late last night. He ...”

The Baron skipped it, looking for mention of the accomplice. The story was sketchy, but it would be fuller in the later papers. He read that he had shown his usual genius for lock-breaking, had been caught while working, and managed to escape against odds after using a dinghy tied to the private landing stage and cutting the other boats loose to stop pursuit. The river police had kept a wide watch for the dinghy, but it had not been located. For the first time:

“... to the knowledge of the police, the Baron used an accomplice, now under arrest. Theodore Greene was interrogated by the Staines police for two hours this morning, and was afterwards taken to Cannon Row, after a visit to Staines by Superintendent Lynch and Chief-Inspector Bristow. The *Wire* understands that immediate developments are expected. The police are confident that the Baron has this time made a vital mistake, and an early arrest is expected.

“Theodore Greene, of independent means, is well known in Mayfair and is a member of the Services Club. He was slightly injured in a scuffle with the guards employed to guard Mr. Eldred’s priceless collection of precious stones, in a strong-room that had been considered impregnable—”

Mannerling was smiling in earnest as he read the hotch-potch of fiction and fact. If Greene had refused to talk at River House, when he must have been dazed and bewildered, he would hold out now. There was just the possibility that the police were playing a crafty game, and that the crook *had* talked: but Mannerling was confident that if they had the photograph – the one thing that could incriminate him, it would have been published.

He turned the paper over, looking for the stop press. The *Wire* was one of those annoying dailies that squeezed its late news anywhere, and he found it at the bottom of the sports

page. It was headed:

“STAINES ROBBERY—LATEST”

And then the Baron stared down, his eyes very narrow, his fingers gripping the paper tightly.

“The *Wire* understands that Scotland Yard connect the robbery at Staines with the robbery at Hampstead, in which Mr. Matthew Kingley was murdered. Greene will be charged at Bow Street this morning.”

Mannering read the paragraph twice, the second time very slowly. As he reached for a cigarette, his hand was unsteady. Only evidence of arrest was given, but if Greene did know Halliwell and the police proved an association, it might lead anywhere.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Cross-Talk

Just after nine, Mannering's head was feeling easier, and he breakfasted well. As he pondered the position he knew that he had no alibi at all. Because of the Halliwell connection he expected the police would by now be at his flat. Bristow always called there when the Baron had been busy, but so far he had never been able to present anything in the way of irrefutable evidence. He might be able to do so this time.

Several ideas were in Mannering's mind. With his padded shoulders, his hair convincingly greyed, and walking with a slight stoop, he left the house in Barnes just before ten, telling Mrs. Lloyd that he expected to be back about midday, and asking her to pack clothes for him for a month's spell in the country. If the worst came to the worst he would have to run for it: at least it was reasonably certain that he had nothing to fear at Barnes.

He took the Morris out of the garage and drove it to a corner of Wimbledon Common, some seven miles away. He left it, reasonably certain that it would not be found until he was able to return: he did not want to chance using it in case the police had traced its number and association with the Staines robbery. It was possible that his description would be on the police lookout list, and the garage-hand at Lunes might recognise it.

Mannering's senses were more alert than ever they had been. Every possible slip was covered, yet there was plenty to do to make sure of his present safety.

He wanted to telephone Lorna, but calls to Portland Place might be tapped by the police. It was equally possible, but not as dangerous, that Leverson's telephone line would be tapped. From a call-box near Putney Station he called the fence.

Leverson's calm voice answered him promptly.

"Hallo, Flick," Mannering sounded as confident as ever.

"Hal-lo." Leverson mentioned no names, but that merely meant that he was being extra cautious. "You've seen the reports?"

"One, and it seemed plenty."

"I haven't been able to find much," said Leverson, who had a surprising number of contacts, and was usually up-to-date with any developments of the police. "Greene hasn't talked, that's certain."

Mannering grew appreciably more cheerful.

"Fine, what else?"

"The Cat's been through: she's had no trouble, and Greene doesn't seem to have mentioned her. He's probably waiting on Kulper, and that means he's also waiting on you. And" – Leverson spoke slowly – "it looks as though he's afraid the capital charge might touch him. You can reckon he's safe until you've had word with him."

"How?" asked Mannering.

"Greene sent for Kollis," said Leverson, "and there isn't a better lawyer for the job. If you talk to Kollis word'll get to Greene and you'll be reasonably safe. I'd try that."

"I will," promised Mannering. "Do you know if Bristow has been round to Clarges Street?"

"He can't have been, and nor can Lynch. They've been with the river police. One of the dinghies was found this morning, and Lynch and Bristow didn't get back to the Yard until nine o'clock. I know Bristow went home. There's a special court at Bow Street at half-past twelve."

"Changing their methods," murmured the Baron. "I wonder if they think they've got me?"

"They can think," said Leverson with a chuckle. "What have you got in mind?"

"We-ell—I need an alibi."

"Can I help?"

"Better not I think. I ought to get someone respectable to perjure themselves for me if necessary. Unless I can bluff

Bristow—there's a chance of that."

"Be careful all the way," warned Levenson.

"I will. But they've got nothing definite or they'd have tried to use it, and word would have reached you. Going to Bow Street?"

"I am not!" exclaimed Levenson. "Now look here, Mannering —"

Mannering was smiling grimly and without humour.

"Seeing that it's linked up with the Halliwell job, I think I'd be a fool to stay away, it'd look worse than if I go. I'll be in good company, too."

"Who?" Levenson sounded resigned.

"Plender, and perhaps Hackett, if I can drag him out. How's Kulper?"

"Conscious but saying nothing. He's all right. I've sent a man round to be with him, in case he tries to bribe Benny. Benny's trouble is money, but he'll be all right if he doesn't get too close to temptation. And he won't do anything for the police, that's certain. Will you come to see Kulper, later?"

"Yes," said Mannering, "I'll ring when I'm coming."

He told Levenson what he had done with the cars, and Levenson laughed as he rang down. Then Mannering left the call-box and booked for Waterloo, catching a train from Putney Station after a five minutes wait. He booked first class, and between Putney and Clapham Junction – the train did not stop at two intermediate stations – he worked as fast as he had ever done in his life. The padding from his coat went out onto the line, he rubbed his hair to get rid of the grey, and wiped the grease-paint off his face with a handkerchief damped in spirit. No one entered the carriage at Clapham Junction, and he had an undisturbed run. It was John Mannering who left the train at Waterloo, and not Mr. Miller.

Mannering was on the look-out all the time. Staines trains ran into Waterloo, and it was possible that the police would be watching. He saw two detectives from the Yard, but they were by the main Portsmouth platform, and he did not think they were looking for the Baron. A quick walk to the centre of the

station took him to the cab-stand, and he told a driver to get to Clarges Street. No cab followed him, and when he reached the street there was none of Bristow's men in sight.

Mannering paid off the cab thoughtfully.

He did not think he had been followed, and it would be impossible for the police to trace his movements from Barnes, unless they knew Mr. Miller.

He was a little worried by the apparent change in Bristow's methods. Bristow was a routine expert and a man who believed that patience could succeed where brilliance could fail. Whenever the Baron had been busy in the past, the morning had found Bristow at Mannering's flat, dogmatic and persistent.

Was this change of method forced because Bristow had been first too busy and then too weary? Or was there something stranger behind it? The Baron was inclined to think the latter, and he went to the lift warily.

No one followed him, and there was no sign of a watcher in the corridor. He turned the key in the door of his flat and pushed it slowly.

His left hand was in his pocket, but he carried no weapon. He wished that he could have had his gas-pistol, but he had left it at Barnes: to have carried incriminating evidence with Bristow in the offing would have been madness. He hardly knew why he felt so tense and worried, and was on the alert, almost afraid of what he would find inside the flat.

He saw Lorna a moment later, and smiled from sheer relief. He had found her at the flat before when he had been afraid of Bristow, for she had a key; but it did not alter the depth of his relief.

She saw it in his wide smile and the lift of his head, and as she smiled back she sent a silent message of warning, a half-turn of her head towards the right.

Mannering stepped in, and saw Peter Lake and Marion Delray.

His smile widened as he waved to them, and Marion, sitting in an easy chair, started to get up.

"John, I'm sorry but—"

"Easy goes," smiled the Baron. "You're worried about Bow Street this morning, but there isn't any need." He laughed into the girl's anxious eyes, and she forced a smile, reluctant and yet hopeful. Lake chuckled, without getting up from a settee.

"Sorry we ambushed you, John, but blame Lorna, she said she thought she had a key. Been looking for you since eight o'clock." His bright eyes searched Mannering's, but the Baron was feeling capable of tackling any new developments.

"Lorna ought to know better," he retorted, "I never get home until ten. I've been busy; and I think I've got something useful."

"John—" it was Marion again.

"Steady," said Mannering, "it's a long way from certain. But I can assure you that Greene is one of the men behind the Kingley murder, *and* he's an acquaintance of your Brian. Whether Brian knows him well, or they've just met once or twice I don't know. I'll have a word with Plender, and Brian won't say anything foolish, I promise you."

"But will Greene?" Marion was sitting upright, Lorna was leaning back and watching: and, the Baron knew, she was thinking hard, wondering how he had escaped the previous night, and what he had found. From the moment of reading the papers she would have been tormented with a dread that the Baron had made his first and final serious mistake. His manner relieved her.

"Well—" Mannering sat on the corner of a table swinging his leg. "I don't know Greene, but I imagine he will keep very quiet until he knows how he stands with the murder case. The hearing this morning will be a formal one, by shock tactics. Peter, will you take Marion along to Bow Street? I'll be in later."

"Right." Peter jumped up with alacrity. Marion moved almost reluctantly, but they left the flat together five minutes after Mannering had entered. Lorna stepped to him as the door closed, and her arms were very tight about him.

"Is it dangerous?"

She was very near him, and he could see her smooth, flawless skin, the clearness of her grey eyes, and their anxiety. He kissed her.

"It's touch and go I think, but I've known worse. You'd probably be jealous if you knew all that happened last night, but don't worry." Chuckling he stepped to the telephone, dialled a number quickly, and a few seconds afterwards heard Toby Plender's dry voice.

"Morning, Toby."

"What, are you up already?" demanded the solicitor. "I've tried to get you—"

"A dozen times, I can guess. The special court's for twelve-thirty, isn't it? You know the connection with our client?"

"Ours? You get to know things, don't you?"

"Who's up?"

"Goring, there's nothing to worry about there."

"Good," said Mannering. Goring was one of the older Metropolitan magistrates, who did not believe it necessary to help the police by unnecessary interrogation. "Can Hackett get there?"

"I doubt it, but I'll ask him. Why?"

"I'd like to let 'em see we're watching," said Mannering.

"All very well," grumbled Plender. "But Halliwell says he does know Greene. He's one of a little clique that he's been with a lot on these damned Mayfair parties. A man named Jackson is another of them. Halliwell doesn't seem happy when he talks of Jackson and he told me you knew all about it. Playing with fire again, my son?"

"Well, it's nice to be warm, and Halliwell isn't the first young idiot to live too high." Mannering rubbed his chin. "Can you see him this morning?"

"Yes, of course."

"Tell him to stick to the truth. He's met Greene socially and that's all. Greene won't talk, I assure you."

"You seem to know too much," complained Plender. "How the devil can I work when I'm half in the dark?"

"Keep trying," said Mannering, "and tell me one thing. Does it seem feasible that Greene's an accomplice of the Baron's?"

"No." Plender rarely hesitated to give an opinion.

"No indeed," agreed Mannering warmly. "Pass this on to

Bristow, Toby, if you get half a chance. Tell him that the whole affair at Staines looks like a put-up job, to make it appear as though this series of jewel robberies is the Baron's. Suggest that Greene was left there to hold the baby, and it was known the Baron—or the man *supposed* to be the Baron—would escape."

Plender hesitated, and Mannering could imagine the way his chin was wagging to and fro.

"But how the devil do you get all this information?"

"Leverson gets to know a lot, too," said Mannering.

"All right," said Plender, and rang down abruptly.

The solicitor was not happy about the source of information, Mannering knew, but that mention of Leverson served to explain how Mannering had found the theories without making Plender too thoughtful. Lorna was smiling as Mannering turned round, and she seemed more confident.

"Weren't you there last night?"

"I was, but it will be a pretty little joke if we can get Bristow to believe someone else was in my place," said the Baron cheerfully. "Bill will be as worried as a cat with nine kittens now, but we've still got a lot to do. Ready?"

"And waiting."

At the nearest call box Mannering squeezed in with Lorna, and called the number of Harvey Kollis, Greene's solicitor. He learned, as he had half expected, that Kollis was already at Bow Street, and decided to call him there. The idea of the Baron talking to a criminal lawyer, giving him instructions on the behaviour of a client occurred to Mannering as irony to perfection, and he passed the joke on. They were laughing when a harsh voice came along the wire, and Mannering had to stifle his outburst.

"Hallo there, who is it?" The voice of the speaker seemed testy.

"Never mind," said Mannering. "Is that Mr. Kollis?"

Lorna had a shock. It was not Mannering's voice: the cadence and the timbre seemed different, and Mannering's expression seemed to be part of it.

"Speaking." Kollis sounded less harsh now.

“Thank you. A word about your client at the special court and elsewhere, Mr. Kollis. Absolute silence on his part is necessary. He knows Halliwell, but only as an acquaintance. Is that understood?”

“Who—?” began Kollis, but Mannering cut in quickly.

“Tell him Kull rang up.”

Mannering closed the receiver, and left the kiosk quickly. He believed Kollis would pass the message on, that Greene would believe Kulper was free and making plans. A great deal depended on Greene’s actions, but the Baron believed that the emergency would be over by one o’clock.

At twelve twenty-five a taxi turned into Bow Street. Mannering and Lorna reached the public court as Theodore Greene came into the dock.

Greene looked as though he had been in the wars.

There was a bruise on the side of his jaw, where Mannering had hit him, and his forehead was bandaged, probably after the crack against the wall. The court was crowded – only Mannering’s request to see Toby Plender on urgent business had enabled him to get through – and there was a murmur of excitement, as the prisoner came in. The Press, with the knowledge that the Baron was concerned, was crowded, the better-known crime-reporters were busy. Mayfair was liberally represented; and for the first time Mannering was able to see the reactions of a collection of people to the Baron. For the most part it was of tense interest: whether they wanted him caught or not he could not tell.

Ten minutes later he was aware of two things.

First, relief that everything had gone through as he had expected. Only formal evidence of arrest was given, and Greene was remanded for eight days. Bristow made the application for the police, and Goring offered no objections.

The second thing Mannering knew was that the court was disappointed. There had been nothing sensational in the evidence, and the name of the Baron had been mentioned only once. The police needed time to work, as well as the Baron.

Lorna pressed his arm.

“Pretty well what you wanted?”

“Exactly what I wanted,” smiled Mannering in high fettle. “Bristow’s seen me, and he looked surprised: he probably thought I was drowned by now. I think I’ll go and see Plender. Hackett didn’t turn up with his protest, but that doesn’t matter. I—”

Mannering half-turned, and then stopped suddenly. Lorna saw his face go pale, saw his lips tighten. She asked no questions as a little man in front of them pushed his way through the crowd, as though in a great hurry to get out. She saw the man’s one eye, and the livid scar, but she did not know that his name was Kulper, and that he should have been in safe keeping at the Unicorn, Aldgate.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ultimatum

Bristow, stepping across the emptying court towards Mannering, saw the Baron standing very still and staring into the crowd, his lips tightly compressed. What it meant Bristow did not know, but he suspected there had been a shock for Mannering.

He was right, and Mannering was finding it hard to accept.

He had been convinced, since his talk with Leverson, that there was no need to worry about the little crook. Now Kulper was there, as large as life – Kulper, who had those damning photographs, whose capture at Staines had been so important that the Baron had taken suicidal risks to get him.

Mannering felt stunned. He did not notice Bristow's grip on his arm until the Inspector tightened it. Lorna was trying to smile, as though there was nothing out of the ordinary in Bristow approaching Mannering, but when she saw Bristow's sober face she felt more afraid than she had been for months, since the Baron's last adventure.

"I'd like a word with you, Mannering."

Mannering turned round, but he did not seem to see Bristow. His eyes were narrowed and very hard, and his hands were clenched.

"Worried?" asked Bristow insistently, and Lorna wanted to kick Mannering. The quiet word did what was wanted, and a smile broke across Mannering's face, although his eyes were not gleaming as they usually did on the Chief-Inspector.

"Just interested, Bill. Things go as you wanted 'em?"

"Pretty well. Do you mind slipping up to the Yard for half an hour?"

To Lorna the invitation seemed to carry a menace, and she hated the thought of what might happen at the Yard. But

Mannering's eyes were laughing again, and she felt relieved, sharing his confidence, as he turned to her.

"Will you catch up with Marion and Peter? I'll be in for lunch, if you can manage an extra."

"Of course." Lorna started to move off, but Bristow broke in with a quick smile.

"There's no reason why you shouldn't come as far as the Yard with us, Miss Fauntley, if it's on your way."

Lorna agreed, feeling easier in her mind. Mannering and Bristow left the cab at the Yard, and Mannering told the driver to go to Portland Place. With the Inspector he walked through the Parliament-Street entry of the Yard, and up the main steps. A sergeant in uniform saluted, and Bristow turned towards the lift. They were soon outside the Chief-Inspector's office. Bristow looked in, and came out quickly.

"We're wanted in the Superintendent's office."

Mannering was beginning to get things in their proper perspective. He could not have avoided this visit to the Yard: a refusal would have done him no good, and the police could, this morning, have picked him up anywhere in London. Yet he was on the alert, wondering why Bristow had brought him, watching for a trap. Bristow and Lynch had adopted a different method of approach over this affair, and Mannering wanted to be as sure as possible that he made no mistake, gave them no chance of catching him.

His voice was tinged with mockery.

"Very formal this morning, Bill?"

"Am I?" Bristow tapped on Lynch's door, heard a gruff "come in", and stood aside for Mannering to go through.

Superintendent Lynch, sprawling back in a swivel chair, lifted a finger to his forehead in welcome. He was dressed in a reddish-brown suit that made him look fatter and larger, and his full face, with the smooth features, was broken in a smile that appeared friendly enough. Mannering had had good reason in the past to suspect that smile.

"Hallo, hallo, Mannering. What's this I hear about you trying to rob us of a man for the Kingley murder? Deuced

inconsiderate of you, seeing the trouble we've had to bring him in."

Mannering laughed, as Lynch pushed cigarettes across his desk. Bristow pulled an easy chair up. Mannering felt both men scrutinising him, and did not turn a hair. He wished that he had been wearing different clothes, for Mr. Miller's Victorian morning coat and trousers were not a perfect fit, but he behaved as if he was turned out as immaculately as ever.

Lynch chuckled throatily, eyeing the clothes.

"Been to a fancy-dress ball, Mannering?"

"The police force is getting observant," said Mannering dryly. "Why the honour, gentlemen? You aren't hoping to try and bribe me off Halliwell, are you?"

"Good gracious, no!" said Lynch, looking round-faced and innocent. "What an idea, Mannering, what an idea!"

He was being childish, which usually meant that he had something up his sleeve. Mannering began to wonder whether he had made a vital mistake, whether a charge would come before he left the office. Greene had said nothing at the court, but he might have talked to the police. Kulper was free, with those photographs! He would be feeling vicious against the Baron.

Lynch began to rummage among the papers on his desk, and the Baron's throat was suddenly constricted. He let his cigarette burn away as he sat back, his eyes narrowed, making every effort to seem unconcerned. He was watching Lynch's fat fingers as though his life depended on it.

Lynch found what he wanted and lifted a single sheet of paper, without a photograph. Mannering lifted his cigarette to his lips slowly, as Lynch threw the paper across his desk.

"We've been getting anonymous letters, Mannering."

He watched closely as Mannering picked the sheet up, and glanced down at it. A single piece of quarto paper of the flimsy type, with a short typewritten and unsigned paragraph, that ran:

"The Baron arranged Kingley's murder. He is organising thefts on a scale that is dangerous. You must get him."

Mannerling read the words, and dropped the note back on the table. His mind was working quickly, for he guessed who had sent it. Kulper: Kulper was trying to make sure that the Baron did not succeed in tracing the real murderer of Matthew Kingley.

Yet the one-eyed man would never know how well this fitted with the Baron's plans.

"Well?" asked Lynch slowly.

"I doubt if the Baron would like it," said Mannerling. "I can't speak for him, of course, but it looks like a double-cross. As if someone is trying to work under cover of the Baron, don't you think so, Bill?"

He turned to Bristow, but Lynch held up a stumpy forefinger.

"All right, all right. You're the Baron, and we'll prove it some day! But I'll be frank with you now, Mannerling. I don't think you were at Eldred's house last night."

Mannerling kept his face expressionless, hiding his jubilation.

"Being generous for once? I wasn't, of course."

Lynch sighed, heavily, as though he was losing hope.

"I mean, I don't think the Baron was there. Read this."

Mannerling took a second sheet of paper. It was a statement made by the guards and the servants of Emmanuel Eldred's house, and the description of the Baron was apparently agreed by them all. It claimed that he had exceptionally bulky shoulders, that he walked and ran with a limp, and that he was shorter than the average. For a moment the Baron was puzzled, thinking that the men had lied: and then he realised why Bristow had not visited him, why Lynch was so free with his admissions.

The Staines servants had only seen him in the moonlight, when he had been carrying Kuiper. The light had distorted his figure, the weight of Kuiper had made him limp, made his shoulders seem exceptionally bulky. It was a heaven-sent reprieve, and he had to fight hard to restrain signs of his elation.

Lynch and Bristow would try to find out where he had been, of course, but for once they were predisposed in his favour.

Mannering looked from one to the other as he flicked the paper back, smiling and suave.

"It should help you, Lynch. I don't know the man, and I can't say whether it's a good description, of course, but if five men swear to it it's pretty reliable."

Lynch shrugged his shoulders.

"It's reliable—for the man who was there last night. And we know the Baron. Your twin brother as near as makes no difference, Mannering. Now listen—" He spread his hands on the littered desk, and his stomach came to rest against the desk-top. "I believe you're the Baron. I believe that you've retired from your fool game, but the Halliwell case has made you start being crazy again. And I tell you, Mannering, the man who sent that anonymous letter is going to be damnably dangerous to you. He's not only trying to do what we'll do in time—put you behind bars for a few years. He's trying to get you strung up. No, listen!" Lynch raised his voice, and Mannering forced back an interruption, sensing the absolute sincerity with which the words were uttered. "I don't want you hanged, Mannering, because I don't think you've ever killed a man. And I don't want the Baron to take the rap for these hotel jobs and the Hampstead and Staines jobs if he didn't do them. I want him for the stuff he has taken. Following me?"

"You put it nicely," murmured Mannering.

"I do, do I? Well, let's see if I put this as well. That man will get you, Mannering. He knows *you're* on his tail, and that's why he's faking the Baron. And by God if he's half as clever as I think he is, he'll prove it. You're in a nasty position, and you're getting deeper by holding out on us for young Halliwell's sake. This fellow's used Halliwell as a cover. Halliwell is one of the gang, Greene's another, and we'll find more. Let's have what you know, Mannering, for if you don't he'll beat you. He's a damned sight too powerful to be manhandled by you."

Lynch stopped, and his eyes were opened to their widest as he stared across the room. Mannering felt the effect of the words, knew that the police were suspicious of the Kulper gang without knowing names, and knew, too, that Lynch was

perilously close to the truth.

If there had been no photographs, Mannering might have made an offer of compromise, and told his story.

The photographs were too dangerous as tangible evidence, and before he talked he had to get them. He was in a worse position than he had ever been, and it was not entirely his own fault. He had to fight alone, or with the help of Levenson, the Cat and others: the police could not help him.

He took refuge in a red herring.

"I see. So you're beginning to agree that Halliwell didn't kill Kingley. Is that it?"

Lynch swore plainly. Bristow stood up restlessly, and walked to the window, staring out across the square. Mannering's lips twitched a little at the corners.

"Oh, *blast* you," snapped Lynch. "I've put the case plain, and if you must be a damned fool, it's your own funeral. Have a cigarette." He pushed the case over again, and his voice dropped and grew wheedling. "Look here, Mannering, you must know that I'm talking sound sense. Halliwell killed Kingley, but I'm prepared to admit he had accessories. I think those accessories afterwards tried to murder him, so that they could get away. Wouldn't have thought of it, if you hadn't talked about the key. Not so soon anyhow," added Lynch cautiously. "Tell us what you know. I'll guarantee that we won't try to put anything across you over past jobs. I'll stand and fall by this affair, and it's for your own good, while it'll stop a murderous gang getting busy again. I won't say I like you overwell, you've caused us a damned sight too much trouble, but I don't want to see you on a mortuary slab."

Lynch broke off, a cigarette poised near his chin. Mannering had to make a big effort to force a laugh.

"I wish you'd forget the idea that I'm the Baron," he said plaintively, "it'll lead you both into trouble." Even as he spoke he recalled the way the Cat had talked about a mortuary slab. Lynch seemed to have as much respect for Kulper as Kate Loffatt, although probably he did not know the man's name.

"Oh, go and hang yourself," said Lynch sharply.

Mannering knew that the Superintendent was no more losing his temper than having hysterics. He was trying to bluff Mannering into talking. Bristow was nearer an outburst of bad temper than the Superintendent. There was a momentary silence, and then Mannering leaned forward, choosing his words deliberately.

"Lynch, I think you're being honest, and I'll tell you something. By accident, I discovered that young Halliwell was being made a dummy for the gentlemen you're talking about, and your friend the letter-writer. There it is. I think I can put my hands on the fellow, and if I do I'll turn him over to you. But it's a case for delicate handling, and the police do slip up. For instance, they think I'm the Baron."

He expected another show of annoyance, but it did not come. Lynch seemed more satisfied than the Baron had the right to expect, and as he smiled his fat face was shiny with perspiration.

"Well, that's something. I still think you're a fool, but you may prove differently. Anything else?"

"Later," promised the Baron.

Lynch stood up, and offered his hand. Mannering shook it, and Bristow opened the door. The air of the stone corridors seemed clear and fresh after the fug in the Superintendent's room, and cleaner because at one time Mannering had wondered whether he would leave it a free man.

He felt like laughing aloud when he pondered over the situation.

Kulper was certainly trying to put the blame for the affair on the Baron, and Lynch had seen that. Chiefly because of that sworn statement Lynch had assumed that Mannering had not been at Staines House. Unwittingly Kulper had helped a great deal.

Mannering was still feeling cheerful when he reached Portland Place. For some reason, the remand had made Marion Delray more confident, and James Halliwell seemed less on edge. Obviously both of them had been afraid that Greene would implicate Halliwell, and an ordeal was past.

Lorna's relief and liveliness did more to cheer the Baron than anything else, and he was prepared to wager now that he would get Halliwell clear. However, when he was alone at his flat, soon after four o'clock, he began to appreciate the difficulties.

He had tried to call Leverson, but the fence was out. He knew of course, that Kulper had managed after all to bribe Benny Lesser, and he would have liked five minutes alone with the innkeeper. Yet, could Benny be blamed? Kulper meant as much, or as little to him, as Mannering did. He made money as easily as he could, and he was safe not to betray anyone to the police. Mannering could hardly expect more; it was simply a trick to Kulper.

Now he had to find the one-eyed man.

He had to get him and the photographs before Kulper could use them, and as far as the Baron knew there was only one way of doing that: through the Status Billiards Club.

Then Mannering remembered someone else who might help: Mrs. Kate Loffatt knew Kulper's organisation.

Mannering hesitated for some seconds, and then pulled the telephone towards him slowly.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mrs. Willison?

The Cat was lying full-length on a divan covered with blue satin that clashed with her flaming red dressing-gown. Her hair was waved more loosely than the Baron had seen before, and she was smiling with her lips partly open. Her expression reminded him of the moment she had kissed him, after he had carried her from the dinghy to the bank. She was hard to understand.

Mannering was leaning back in a steel-tubed chair opposite her, and the last chime of five came from a clock on the mantelpiece.

There were cocktails at their elbows, and the Cat proved an expert mixer. Her rather big frame was hidden by the sleek lines of the dressing-gown: to Mannering she looked more voluptuous than ever. Her voice held a note of mockery as she eyed the Baron; she seemed to be playing with him, cat and mouse.

“So you had to come, Baron?”

“Strictly on business,” said the Baron quietly.

“That’s so?” She rested her hand lightly on the neck of the gown, as though wanting to fling it open. She wore no stockings, and a pair of heelless slippers were hanging from her rosy heels. Mannering wondered how far she would go, what terms she would try to force. He waited, until she suddenly shrugged her shoulders and snatched up her glass, spilling a little White Lady on the divan.

“You’re as cold as they make ’em, aren’t you? It must be the Lorna woman. Fauntley, isn’t it?”

Mannering made no answer, and Kate laughed after a short pause.

“Sorry. I told Flick I wouldn’t make any cracks about the Mannering end, but you could have dosed me some when I

learned who the Baron was. You've earned all you've got, I'm telling you. Well, what do you want?"

"Kulper."

She nodded as though her question had been simply rhetorical.

"I expected that. Seen Leverson yet?"

"He phoned me, after I rang you. Kulper bribed Benny, and another man Leverson put in charge. That's happened before, but it's the first time anyone's had my photographs before, and I'm up against it." There was no sense in mincing words, and Mannering had an idea the Cat preferred bluntness.

"Kulper's got the lot of them," she said.

"You're sure?" He grew more tense.

"I'm saying so. He phoned for mine, and nearly froze me when I said I'd burned it. What's more, I don't think he believed me." She was smiling now, but Mannering fancied she was a little apprehensive, uncertain of herself. "I'm telling you something else, friend. I'm all packed up, and if you hadn't called I'd have been half-way to Paris by now. I don't like Kulper, and I don't think he's liking me in future. He's busy just now, but he'll find time for me soon, if I'm crazy enough to stay around."

Mannering's expression altered in a flash.

"Good God, I'm sorry! I didn't realise—"

"Forget it. It's done, and I'm tired of London. Well, I can tell you this. Kulper told me today that the billiard hall is off for keeps. I'm to meet Jackson at the Rialto Cinema at seven tonight, and Jackson's going to take me to the new address. Maybe!" She looked venomous for a moment. "He'd get me there, and it'd be the last thing I'd know: only Kulper's guessed wrong and I'm flitting. Well, does it help?"

"A lot."

"Meaning you'll follow Jackson?"

"Meaning just that."

"And when you've found them?"

"I'm after those photographs," said Mannering.

The Cat leaned forward, tense and serious.

“Look here, fella, Kulper’s too dangerous for those tricks. Beat the country, and forget him. Let the police on if you like, it would be healthier for you and me. Take a trip, I know Paris and other places some, and we’ll make a date. It’s safest, and it means fun.”

“I’ve a reputation to keep, Kate, we mustn’t forget that.”

The Cat tossed her yellow head back contemptuously.

“Sure, and Lorna! Well, it’s up to you, but listen, Mannering. If you get in a spot and have to flit, you’ll find me sometimes at the Cafe Louise, near the Opera House, Paris,” she added as an afterthought. “Don’t forget.”

Mannering stood up. “I won’t, I promise you.”

“I bet you won’t.” She laughed, and then her expression changed, she looked anxious. “Now scram. Kulper isn’t watching me tonight, he thinks I’m too scared to creep away. You’re all right down below. O.K.”

“It’s damned difficult to say thanks,” said Mannering awkwardly.

“Not so hard.” She came up to him, gripping his coat, and forced her face upwards, the lips pushed forward a little, a sparkle of allure in her eyes. Mannering kissed her lightly, and then turned away.

The door closed behind him with a sharp click, and for several minutes afterwards the Cat sat back on the divan, her eyes brooding, that mocking, twisted smile on her ripe red lips.

Mannering had time to call at Portland Place to see Lorna, before going on to Clarges Street. He telephoned Levenson again, but refused to tell the fence what he had learned from the Cat. Levenson had put himself in too much danger already, and the coming finale was for the Baron alone.

There was one thing that gave him some pleasure. As Mannering, he had had no message from Kulper. Despite the photographs, Kulper did not know the Baron was John Mannering. He would find out in time, of course, if the Baron allowed him to act.

At half-past six Mannering left his flat. As he turned into the

street he heard a familiar snorting roar. Peter Lake's car drew up; Peter braked hard and noisily, and waved a hand. Mannering stepped up to the kerb, smiling.

"So the suicide trap works again, does it?"

"Surprising what you can do if you try," said Peter. "By the way, I haven't thanked you properly for that cheque. I'll see you get it at the end of the month, pronto. The Mater is tight-fisted at times, and she isn't taking it kindly that I'm voting for Marion."

"Don't let it worry you," said Mannering, "and there's no hurry. No softening of the maternal bosom?"

"As a matter of fact," said Lake soberly, "she's getting pretty vicious about Marion. If the kid ever comes back, I fancy she'll have a hell of a life."

"Marion can look after herself," Mannering said with conviction, "and you say she's plenty of money?"

Lake pulled a face.

"We-ell—that's part of the trouble. Damnable thing to say about one's own parent, even foster," said Peter awkwardly, "but you know the income isn't just my mother's own. Marion's capital's in trust. The interest helps mother until Marion's twenty-five. Well, that's all right as far as it goes, but if Marion breaks with the Mater, down go the family finances. Doesn't affect me much, because I get damn-all from her, anyhow. Luckily there was a spot of cash tied on when I was adopted." Lake was perspiring, and he pushed his handkerchief over his short, upstanding hair. Mannering could understand that he disliked this job, and appreciated the fact that Lake was talking frankly. It might mean a lot.

Gertrude Willison had been set dead against Halliwell apparently from the moment marriage was talked of, and that was interesting. She might even be interested in getting Halliwell hanged.

"Let's get it straight," Mannering said, with one foot on the running-board of the Talbot. "Mrs. Willison got something for looking after you, and more for taking care of Marion?"

"Ye-es. She—er—had a rough spell when she was younger,

you know. Father and husband went smash in some crazy scheme. Husband committed suicide. Mother made a living by adopting youngsters and—er—you see what I'm driving at?"

"You're saying that if Marion doesn't go back to her aunt, Mrs. Willison's income will stop?"

Lake stared.

"Good God, no! Mater's got the purse strings. Trustee and all that. You know, with Alder and Craythorne. Can do what she likes with it until Marion's twenty-five. Goes to Marion afterwards, but as for the quantity, well, capital has been lost before."

"Here, steady," protested Mannering. "I didn't know Marion's father, but no one would be fool enough not to protect the capital. First you say Mrs. Willison lives on the interest—"

"And then that she's got control of the capital," said Lake. "Well, she has, with the solicitors. Now old Alder's been round to the house a lot lately, and there's something hatching. The Mater's going to send an ultimatum to Marion, to come back, or —"

Mannering was looking more thoughtful than ever.

"Threats and ultimatums, eh? I'll get Plender to look up the legal side of it. You know what you're hinting at, Peter?"

"Well, I've got an idea," said Lake dejectedly. "Pretty swinish, but after all it's Marion's money, and if she's in love with the feller, murderer or not—"

"Halliwell didn't kill Kingley," said Mannering sharply, "and I think I can prove it in forty-eight hours. If you're not talking out of the back of your neck, there's some funny business with Mrs. Willison. Try and get the hang of it, will you, by the morning?"

"I'll try, but no guarantees. As I've said, I'm not altogether popular. As a matter of fact I know she'll ask me to put the proposition up to Marion, whatever it is. And a condition will be that she cuts Halliwell."

"Don't tell the girl about it until you've seen me," said Mannering, and then he laughed shortly. "Sorry, I'm getting dictatorial. But I think it would be happier if we had a chat

about it first.”

“Good Lord, yes! Exactly my idea,” said Peter Lake more cheerfully. “Well, I’ve a date, and thanks to your fifty I can keep it. Things were looking black, because I’d pretty nearly spun out, and they’re not fond of credit accounts at the court.”

“My fault,” smiled Mannering. “I didn’t get that word in with the Divisional, but you deserved a lesson, anyhow. That youngster any the worse?”

“No, thank God. Called round on her folk this morning, and she’s as fit as a fiddle. Didn’t even recognise me. Well, can I give you a lift?”

“I doubt if another attempted suicide would get me inside that rattle-trap again,” said Mannering, and Lake chuckled as he let in the clutch.

“All right, but put a fiver on her on Saturday. Third race at Brooklands. A safe bet, and you’ll get tens. So long! Mum’s the word about the financial juggling with Marion, of course.”

“For both of us,” nodded Mannering.

He walked towards Piccadilly, and hailed the first taxi that passed, as the racer roared and snorted at the other end of the street. He still had a quarter of an hour, but he wanted to be at Wardour Street early, for the meeting with Jackson.

Lake’s garbled story made him thoughtful. There was something that he had not told Mannering, either because he had confused it, or because of a dislike of putting the thing badly. On the surface Gertrude Willison was going to try and blackmail Marion into deserting Brian Halliwell, and the woman was certainly capable of trying to exert pressure. But why was she so hostile to the youngster?

Mannering knew the girl well enough to know her aunt would lose, and he was puzzled. Judging logically, it would be to her advantage to be friendly with the girl. The capital was Marion’s if only in trust.

“I’m not so sure,” thought Mannering, aloud. “Damn you, Peter, I wanted a clear head tonight.”

The cab pulled up at the Corner House. Mannering gave the driver ten shillings and told him to wait outside the Rial to.

Then he stationed himself behind an evening paper, as the crowd pressed to and fro.

His heart thumped when he saw his quarry. Jackson was driving a small Singer sports car, and he parked in Wardour Street. He waited impatiently, staring every few seconds at his watch. At ten past seven his lips moved, as though in a curse, and he walked into the Corner House. Mannering watched him go into a telephone booth, and guessed he was telephoning Kulper.

Jackson left the booth three minutes later and went straight to his car. Mannering climbed into the taxi, after a muttered: "Keep the little Singer in sight."

They started off quickly, going towards Leicester Square, round Trafalgar Square, along Whitehall to Westminster Bridge. On the far side of the bridge Jackson turned right, towards Lambeth, while Mannering sat back in the cab, trying to keep his nerves steady. Before long, with luck, he would know where Kulper lived.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kulper at Home

The setting sun was bathing the wide stretches of the Thames in a deep red glow by the Houses of Parliament, lending the stream of cars along the road, the hundreds of pedestrians and the buildings on the Lambeth side, the same deep richness. It was dazzling on the polished panels of Jackson's Singer, and twice Mannering believed that he had lost his quarry, but the cabby held on.

Jackson had taken a turning nearly opposite Lambeth Bridge, and taxis in the side streets of that squalid part of London were things of interest, and Mannering was desperately anxious to create no suspicions. The Singer pulled across the road without the formality of a signal, and as the cabby swerved to avoid it he roared a hoarse volley of abuse at Jackson. Jackson would never dream the cabby was deliberately following him, after that.

The man shouted a retort, and a moment later he saw Jackson's indicator go out, as though turning left or slowing down. With a praiseworthy speed the cabby swung his wheel, making his turn in one complete sweep, and getting well after the Singer.

It was parked fifty yards off the main road, and as the cab bowled past it, Mannering saw Jackson entering the middle house of three built together. They were tall and drab, distinguished only because the neighbouring houses were little more than hovels. On the other side of the road were tall warehouses, with torn advertising posters fluttering in a slight evening breeze.

The sun, shining between two warehouses, lit the top of the houses and left the lower walls gloomy and grim. As Mannering

looked at it he was filled with a sense of depression, almost hopelessness.

The cabby leaned back.

“Anythink more, sir?”

“Turn at the first corner, so that I can keep the house in sight,” Mannering said.

The man obeyed as though used to receiving similar orders and, turning his cab abruptly, placed Mannering so that he could easily keep the house under observation.

Mannering’s heart was beating faster, and his depression was easing. Here was vitally important work to do, and there was no time to worry about premonitions.

It was twenty-five past seven, and it was reasonably certain that he could not break into the house until after dark – about half-past eight. It might be only a port of call for Jackson, and there was no guarantee yet that Kulper was on the premises. With Kulper went the photographs.

Mannering studied the front windows, professionally. There were four stories, with two windows on each floor, long, narrow, and with walls decorated with heavy window-sills and granite pillars. Ugly to the eye, but excellent for Mannering’s purpose if he had to climb them. Yet in full view of the street, such a project seemed impossible.

Impatiently he offered the cabby a cigarette, and: “I’ll be back in ten minutes, but if the man in the Singer comes out again, follow him and when you’ve finished, be at the Rialto again. Clear?”

“Right, Guv’nor.” The cabby took a five-pound note without blinking an eye. Mannering nodded, smiled, and walked sharply across the road.

There was a wide road, called Bramley Street, running on one side of the three houses, a walled alley on the other. Nearby were the unoccupied workmen’s cottages, some in the early stages of demolition. Boarded windows and paintless woodwork struck an odd contrast with the shining Singer.

Mannering took the road, and walked as far as a second alley.

It had a dry, cindery surface, but Mannering was more interested in the back of the house Jackson had entered. A four-foot brick wall ran round the three tall houses, and above them was barbed wire, ostensibly to keep cats out. There were three solid doors in the wall, all of them closed; and all had yale locks.

Mannering took it all in a glance. He had no desire to attract the attention of anyone glancing out of the window, and he walked sharply to the end of the road before turning along a side street and making for the corner where he had his cab.

A forced entry seemed easy enough by the back way.

The houses themselves might be four-storied, but at the back were single-story wash-houses. Once he was through the gates he could climb on to the wash-house roofs, and then through a window.

At the corner he did not see the cab, and his heart missed a beat. Had Jackson left?

He laughed to himself as he found that he had come out at a different corner, and hurried towards the cabby fifty yards along the road. The man was sitting still with his fat arms folded over his wheel, and his glasses half way down his nose. As Mannering arrived he spoke out of the side of his mouth, without looking one way or the other.

"Nothing yet, sir. I—blimey, just in time, 'ere 'e comes!" Mannering's heart leapt; luck was working with him. He stepped into the cab as Jackson walked from the middle house. The cabby was up to all likely tricks, and had passed the Singer before it had moved away. Jackson looked neither right nor left, and there seemed to be no one watching from the windows.

Mannering sat back, his mind alert.

He had seen enough of his driver to be sure that the man would keep on the trail, and his one hope was that Jackson would not go out to Barnet. The chase led towards the City, and just twenty minutes after the start of the run, Mannering was sitting back in his cab in bewilderment. Jackson had gone to 5a, Graffley Street, the home of Mrs. Gertrude Willison.

Mannering had hardly time to assimilate this new discovery, or to go through the awkward hints that Peter Lake had given him. It had seemed impossible that Gertrude Willison could have anything to do with the affair, yet this seemed conclusive evidence.

Jackson was in the house less than five minutes. He was either a fool, or too worried to observe much, for he did not glance a second time at the cab that passed him in exactly the same way as it had at Lambeth.

Half afraid that the run would be straight back to Kulper's house, Mannering waited on tenterhooks, but Jackson went towards Oxford Street, and turned down Edgware Road at Marble Arch. His car pulled into one of the wide squares leading to the left, with small gardens in the middle, and houses as tall and old as that of Kulper's on either side. He stopped half-way down the street and, leaving the engine running, hurried up a short flight of stone steps.

Mannering thought swiftly.

Jackson did not propose to be long, or he would have stopped the engine. Mannering told the cabby to pull in, and jumped down.

"Turn round, fast. Keep your sign up, and if our man wants a cab, let him get in, whether I'm in or not. If I'm not, let me get on board."

The driver did not point out that he was breaking several by-laws, but went off quickly. Mannering took a small, sharp-pointed awl from his pocket – he was carrying tools in case of an emergency job – and walked to the Singer. He stabbed through the cover of the nearest front tyre three times, heard the air hissing out and jumped round for the taxi. By the time he had come level with the Singer, Jackson was out of the house and in the car. It moved a few yards before Mannering saw Jackson's expression change as he climbed out to investigate. Jackson turned at once, and his face lighted as he saw the taxi. Crouching in the far corner, Mannering waited tensely as the driver pulled alongside the Singer, and Jackson snapped an order: "Bramley Street, Lambeth. Know it?"

“Yessir.” The cabby was perfect, obviously bent on a substantial reward.

Jackson climbed in and the cabby banged the door behind him. At the same moment Mannering shot his right hand out, jerking Jackson off his balance. There was a cry of alarm, Mannering saw Jackson’s sallow face twisted in fear, and then he took his gas-pistol from his pocket. It was a couple of inches from the man’s nose.

“See this, Jackson?”

Jackson could see the gun, although he could not get the face of the gunman clearly. Mannering’s left hand was gripping the other’s wrist, and not gently.

“Y-yes!”

“Good,” said Mannering. “When I tell you I’m the Baron you’ll know why I want you.”

Jackson looked scared out of his life. His womanish lips were trembling, and his body was shaking.

“I—I—”

Mannering cut across the words sharply.

“I’ll ask questions, Jackson. I know Kulper’s at Bramley Street. Is that his home?”

“Ye-es.” Jackson’s voice was barely audible.

“Has he got the photographs there?”

“Oh—*God!*”

“Has he?” There was something in the tense voice of the Baron that would have struck fear into a stronger man than Jackson, and the other nodded wildly.

“Yes, yes, all of them! I’m to be there at half-past eight, someone—someone knows your real name, we’re going to get at you—”

Mannering’s eyes narrowed, but he lost no time pondering over that discovery, although it flashed through his mind that Kate Loffatt knew him as Mannering, and to the best of his knowledge none of the other Kulper organisation did. Had the woman scorned been dangerous after all?

“All right—who’s the someone?”

“I—I don’t know!”

“Man or woman?”

“I don’t know, I tell you!” Jackson was frantic, glaring round as the cab swung round by Hyde Park. “Let me out of here, let me—”

Mannering lifted his gun a little, and held his breath. The ether-gas squirted full into Jackson’s unsuspecting face. It acted promptly, and Mannering pulled him on to the seat next to him, making sure of unconsciousness with chloroform. As Jackson slumped down he tapped on the glass. Half way along Park Lane the cab stopped.

Mannering jumped out, alone, but with another fiver in his hand.

“Take this fellow to the Yard, cabby, and tell them he’s a friend of the Greene arrested at Staines last night. Understand?”

For the first time the old driver looked startled, and his lips gaped open.

“Gawd! I—”

“And tell them exactly what happened,” Mannering went on quickly, “excepting that we stopped at Bramley Street.

We followed this fellow from Wardour Street down Edgware Road. Got it?”

“’Ere, ’arf a mo—”

“And tell them you were forced to do it,” urged Mannering. “You’ll have nothing to worry about, and I’ll testify for you if necessary. Take my word for it.”

“Orl right, Boss.” The man relaxed suddenly. “But why not say he was loaded up with another passenger, and the cove slipped at a traffic block? Easy for you.”

“Because Jackson can prove it’s a lie, and the police might not like it,” said Mannering. “Stick to the truth, George; I’ll find out from the Yard where to get you again.”

He pushed the fiver into the man’s hand, and hurried off. The cabby scratched his head, looked at his remaining passenger, and then drove off mumbling to himself.

Mannering reached the first telephone kiosk, and put through a telephone call.

A few seconds later, at the other end of the wire, Lorna

Fauntley said anxiously: "It's not too risky, John?"

"It's the one and only chance," said Mannering. "Pecker up, sweetheart, and with luck we'll have Halliwell out and someone else in before this time tomorrow."

He rang down and picked up a cab, leaving it by a garage on the opposite side of Westminster Bridge. In ten minutes he had hired a small Austin from the garage, and was driving quickly towards Bramley Street. He had a driving licence in a false name that enabled him to get past the cautious garage-clerk, who had no desire to find trouble by letting a car go to a man not holding a licence.

Darkness was over the Metropolis when he turned down Bramley Street, parking the Austin twenty yards from the corner of the alley. Then, with his tool-kit round his waist and his mask slung round his neck but hidden by his coat collar, he turned towards the middle door of the three courtyards.

People were passing up and down Bramley Street, but there was no light, and Mannering welcomed the darkness. A narrow beam shone from a window on the second floor of Kulper's house, but it worked neither for nor against the Baron.

He reached the middle door, and took out a pick-lock.

Yale locks were never easy to open. Once a man turned down the alley and the Baron pressed close against the wall. The man turned into the garden of one of the hovels on the opposite side.

Mannering turned back to his work.

It was more nerve-racking than he had expected, for the patter of footsteps was continual, and once he saw the silhouette of a policeman passing the end of the alley. He had the lock back then, and he pressed close against the door. The policeman walked past stolidly, and Mannering pushed.

The door did not budge either way.

Kulper was being careful, for that meant it was bolted on the inside. The ledges of the door ran on the outside, and Mannering could not get at them to cut them with a file. In any case it would have taken too long.

Heart thudding, he reached up for the first strand of barbed wire above the brick wall.

He had wanted to avoid climbing because of the risk of being seen easily from the street, but he had no chance. Wire-cutters snapped the strand easily, and there was a little *ping!* as it parted, and curled back.

Now he had to reach the second strand, and he could not get at it with climbing or jumping. There was no hold for climbing, and he took a chance.

Holding the wire-cutters with the mouth wide, he jumped up and stabbed them towards the wire. Twice he missed. The third time the wire went between the maw, and he pressed sharply. A little *ping!* came again, and the second wire curled back.

There was room to get through now.

Mannerling hoisted himself up quickly, carefully. As his eyes came over the level of the wall he could see the policeman passing on the far side of the street, and the winking of car lights on the main road. He would be several seconds climbing over, and if any one caught a glimpse of him the hue and cry would start.

He waited several seconds, and there was a moment when no one turned into Bramley Street. The Baron made his effort then.

There was glass stuck in concrete at the top of the wall, but it did not tear through his gloves. For a moment he was poised on the wall, clear for anyone who glanced up; and then he jumped down.

His foot kicked against a tin can that he had not seen in the darkness. The clatter as it went flying was like a tumult, and he waited in the shadows, heart thumping, nerves at a stretch, afraid of a cry of alarm.

None came.

The Baron went on slowly.

His eyes were able to make out the looming shapes, and he could see the single-storied wash-house looming towards him. He reached it, and as he went along a narrow passage he saw at the far end a window that led to the house.

Mannerling reached it. No sound came from inside the house, and he could see no light, although the curtains were back. He examined the window carefully, and for a few seconds he used

his torch.

The window was wired with an alarm on the inside, and he could just see the catch, a patent one that it would be almost impossible to force back without springing the alarm. Kulper had taken no chances at all, and the odds were lengthening against the Baron.

At eight-thirty – someone was coming to name him. The name and the photograph together would beat him; the name alone would put him for ever in Kulper's power.

"Damn it, no!" snapped Mannering aloud.

He took a small chisel from his pocket, and pressed it against the putty lining the window. It went in fairly easily, and he started to work in earnest, running the chisel round the whole of the window frame. The putty came away in small pieces. In five minutes he had it all off, and he pressed against the top of the window, leaning his shoulder against the bottom.

There was a slight *crack!* as the glass pulled away from the inside plaster, and then the whole sheet toppled towards him. Mannering grabbed, but it slipped from his gloves, and for a moment he was afraid that it would fall. If it crashed—

Somehow he stopped it from hitting the ground, supporting it with his right shin, and feeling the sharp pain as it grazed his leg. He steadied it, and then rested it slowly against the ground. His head was drumming, for that crash would have been a fatal one, and he was facing disaster.

Again he used his torch, flashing it round for the wires. There was no need to cut them, for with the window pane right out he could climb through without touching them. He went through carefully, finding oil-cloth beneath his feet, hearing the sliding noise as his rubber-soled shoes slid against it.

Cautiously he flashed the torch. On the far side of the room was the door, and he prayed that it would not be locked. There was a squeak as he turned the handle, but the door opened silently.

A gleam of light came from the passage, but no sound.

Mannering tiptoed through. He slipped his mask over his mouth and chin, and pulled his hat well down. The Baron was

working, slowly, silently, more grimly than he had ever done in his life before.

There would be no mercy from Kulper. He could not even rely on being handed to the police, for he could implicate them too deeply. He was gambling with his life against those photographs, and he went on to the stairs, mounting them carefully, ears strained to catch the slightest sound.

He saw a crack of light coming from beneath a door, and heard the murmur of voices.

He glanced about him. There were two large cupboards near, and a bathroom, all offering shelter. He stepped cautiously towards the door, trying to catch the words.

It was Kulper's voice, but he could distinguish nothing else. Was he too late, did Kulper know his name?

He waited, his heart thumping loudly, and then very sharply through the silence came a harsh ringing.

The front-door bell!

Mannering darted back into the shadows of a cupboard, as he went he heard the scraping of a chair. The door opened abruptly and Kulper came out, very clear against the light.

Kulper walked sharply towards the head of the stairs, and to Mannering. He had only to stretch out a hand to touch the Baron, and Mannering dared hardly breathe.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Portraits of The Baron

Kulper reached the spot where Mannering was standing, and passed it without turning his head. He rounded the stair head and started to go down. His footsteps echoed clearly down the stairs, and Mannering waited until his head had dropped out of sight. Then he moved from the cover and went towards the room with the open door.

He was treading like a cat, his ears alert for the sound of the opening street door, and the return of Kulper and the caller, while he reached the room. Standing very still, he peered through the gap between the hinges.

There was a man leaning back in a leather armchair with his eyes closed. The Baron had never seen him before, although he had a similar plumpness and floridness to Theodore Greene. It was one of Kulper's men, and that was important. One man inside, how many below?

The front door had opened. Voices came again, Kulper's very clearly.

"Good evening, sir. Is Jackson with you?"

The 'sir' proved that it was someone Kulper respected, a man, not a woman. Suspicions of Mrs. Willison faded. The man's answer no more than a grunt: an arrogant gentleman, the Baron fancied.

He dropped back behind the cover of the cupboards, certain now that it was too dark for either of the others to see him. Kulper was coming up the stairs first. The second man was wearing a mackintosh with the collar turned up about his face, and in the shadows of the light from the hall he looked grotesque, unrecognisable.

Mannering was on tiptoe as Kulper and the newcomer

reached the cupboard. His hands were free and clenched tightly, and he was prepared to start a fight at any moment.

They went past, and into the room. Mannering heard the door close, and waited for the sound of a key turning in the lock.

It did not come; Kulper felt safe.

There was a little smile on the Baron's lips as he left his cover and went towards the room. The man who had just come in was speaking gruffly. Mannering had heard the voice before.

Where?

"What's this about Jackson?"

"He was to have called for you, sir." Kulper's voice was as expressionless as ever. "Perhaps—"

"I haven't been home. What about the photographs, Kulper? You've got them all?"

"Excepting one that Kate Loffatt had: she says that she burnt it. I'm afraid she had tricked us, for she did not meet Jackson."

That familiar voice came again, and the Baron's eyes were very hard and narrow. There was a barrier of disbelief in his mind and yet a knowledge that the thing was true. He waited, while the speaker said harshly:

"Doesn't matter, we've got the Baron for keeps. I can identify him all right, although—"

"Do you know him?" asked Kulper very softly.

"I—"

At that moment Mannering flung open the door.

He had a gun in his hand, the mask was over his face, completely hiding him, and he stood like a statue on the threshold of the room. Kulper swung round, the man like Greene started up, and stared, his expression changing in a flash, while Mannering looked at the usually cheerful eyes, the rugged face and the short straight hair of Peter Lake.

The Baron understood now why Lake had tried to confuse the trails, casting suspicion on his foster mother to make sure he was clear himself. Lake had not been in England for the Maycourt robbery, but he had returned from Germany in ample

time to murder Kingley. Mannering understood a dozen other things as he stared with his eyes narrowed, and the silence in the room seemed menacing.

It was the Baron who broke it.

He used the voice that Lorna had heard that afternoon, husky, deep, nothing like John Mannering's. He saw Lake's eyes widen, knew the man was startled, for he had expected Mannering's voice. The gun in the Baron's hand – a loaded automatic now, for he had not dared to rely on his gas-pistol with the occupants of Kulper's house – was steady and threatening.

"So you think you know the Baron, eh? Like a lot of others you're wrong. Kulper, where are those photographs?"

Kulper gulped. His single eye was roving, but Mannering was unaffected. If it came to a point he would shoot: there was going to be no escape for Kulper or Lake or the third man.

Now he was holding the cards he had to hurry, for Lorna was to phone the police to raid the house at a quarter to nine. He had ten minutes, perhaps a little more.

"Where are they, blast you!"

"In—the safe," gulped Kulper.

"Fine. You seem worried, little man, and that must be a change for you. Who're you?" he stared at Lake, his eyes narrowed, hiding their hazel lights. That was all Lake could possibly recognise about him, and he did not want that recognition. He knew from Lake's manner that the man was telling himself he had made a mistake, and a big one.

"Don't waste time. Who are you?"

It was the man like Greene who gave way.

He was trembling, and Mannering knew the threat of that gun was too much for him. He broke into a torrent of words, without pausing between the sentences, and his eyes were darting nervously to and fro.

"His name's Lake—Lake! He's given us orders, he told us to trick you at Staines. He—"

"I'm more interested in Kingley's murderer," said the Baron very slowly.

Lake was staring at him, his face working. Only Kulper seemed to have the remnants of self-possession, but he kept still, his hands in sight. Each of the trio knew that the Baron would not hesitate to shoot.

"It was Lake. *Lake!*" screeched the other. "He—"

"You little—" began Lake, and he jumped at the man, his eyes blazing.

As he moved, the Baron touched the trigger of his gun. There was a sharp report, echoing clearly in the room, and a bullet passed between the two men. Lake drew back, his face very pale. Kulper was staring, his scar flaming red.

"I'm serious," said the Baron softly. "Lake, did you kill Kingley?"

"I—"

The Baron raised his gun again, and Lake stopped short, biting at his underlip. Mannering spoke very softly to Kulper. "Get me those faked photographs."

Kulper hesitated, The gun moved, and he stood up slowly, going towards a safe in the corner of the room. Mannering had them all covered, and he watched Kulper like a lynx. The one-eyed man played with the combination. The safe opened, and his right hand went in. The Baron's forehead was wet with sweat and he watched tensely, expecting Kulper to bring out a gun as a weapon. Kulper did not.

The photographs came, and Kulper shut the safe slowly, and then turned to the table.

"Count them," Mannering ordered.

There were fifteen, and eight negatives, allowing for two prints of each photograph – including the one that Kate Loffatt had given him – the Baron believed they were all there. "Leave them and sit down, on the chair next to Lake." Kulper obeyed. Mannering realised that the men were feeling as he had felt when Kulper had held him up in Jackson's house. They knew that if they moved they would be shot, they were afraid of the Baron. They had no idea of the reason for the tearing haste in his mind, urgency he dared not show for fear of weakening his hand.

"That's right. Now, Lake, I've heard of you. I have a friend who is also a friend of John Mannering's."

Lake started, but the Baron went on quickly, and his words sounded so cut and dried that the others could hardly disbelieve him.

"I was asked by Mannering, through that friend, to clear Halliwell. And when I was brought into it, I was glad of the request. I'll tell you now what I think happened. You, Lake, are badly in need of money. Marion Delray, who you wanted to marry, turned you down for Halliwell, and earned Mrs. Willison's hatred. She had wanted the marriage. Through Jackson, you worked Halliwell into a fast set, and to get over your money difficulties you linked up with Kulper. To succeed, you needed men in the right social clique. You used Greene, Jackson, perhaps others, and you hired men like Loffatt and Mickey the Wisk to work for you. All the time you were protected, you bought the silence of the others by promising good money if they went to jail without talking. You organised a dozen robberies, including the Elan affair, and Halliwell's at the Maycourt Hotel. Didn't you?"

Lake licked his lips. Kulper moved restlessly, and the third man was shivering. Mannering knew he was outlining what had happened, knew he had found the whole truth.

"Didn't you?"

Lake muttered: "Yes—yes."

"Halliwell met Jackson at the Maycourt," Mannering went on, "and while he was drinking with him one of your other men took the wallet with the jewels. You reckoned it would give you a fine motive for getting at Kingley's safe, leaving Halliwell to stand the rap. And when you got there. Lake, Kingley recognised you. Answer, blast you!"

Lake was writhing now, and he gasped an affirmative that Mannering hardly heard. Mannering went on softly.

"So you shot him, knowing of Halliwell's quarrel, and what it would mean. You got Jackson, when Halliwell went to see him, to tell him what had happened, you persuaded Halliwell he was in danger. Jackson sealed up the room at Renman's, and then

got away. If Mannering hadn't arrived in time—by God! *You* were with Mannering!”

It was beautifully done. If Lake had had any lingering doubts as to the Baron's identity, they went then. Moreover, Mannering realised that Lake had been watching him closely as Mannering all the time, finding how the Halliwell defence was going, in his guise as the cheerful, somewhat feckless friend.

“Oh, God!” groaned Lake. “Stop it, for God's sake, stop—”

“You were with Mannering,” repeated the Baron very slowly. “And you were worried because of Mannering's interest. When Kulper afterwards met me at Jackson's place you saw a God-sent opportunity of killing me, at Staines, making it look as though I killed Kingley and had organised the other thefts. But it failed, Lake, because I knew Kate Loffatt, and she saw me through.”

“The—*Cat*,” muttered Kulper.

“The Cat,” said the Baron, and his voice rose in triumph. “Before she left for America” – he lied about that deliberately – “she told me that she was to meet Jackson tonight, and she guessed what would happen to her. So I met Jackson instead, followed him here, and then back. He called at Lake's house, but I did not realise its significance. Then I caught him, learned someone was coming who thought they knew me from the photographs. I thought I'd best join in. Understand?”

Lake was speaking, and Kulper's voice was cracked.

“What—what are you going to do?”

The Baron laughed, lightly, and yet ominously.

“I sent Jackson to Scotland Yard, Kulper, and by now he will have told all he knows. When Greene realises you can't help him, he'll talk too. Both of them denied killing Kingley. So did you, Kulper, but you probably knew it was Lake, and you'll certainly be charged as accessory.”

Then for the first time Kulper showed a sign of fighting.

“That is so? You forget how we can implicate *you*. Baron. You'll be well advised to go away—”

The Baron laughed again, softly.

“You think so? I'm going soon, with the photographs and

that confession. If you do happen to have one left, Greene will explain how he altered it from the original. Altered it deliberately, perhaps, to resemble someone who *could* be caught by the police. You haven't a leg to stand on, and—"

Then Kulper moved.

He seemed to know he was finished unless he took a desperate chance, and his right hand moved towards his coat. The Baron guessed the man had a gun in his shoulder holster, and jumped forward before Kulper had it out.

He reached the table, and overturned it. It crashed onto the three men, sending Kulper sprawling, knocking Lake and the third man down. Kulper's gun flew across the room, and as it went Mannering drew his gas-pistol from his pocket. He pressed the trigger three times, once in front of each man's face, and as the gas took effect he slipped his chloroform pad out, and finished the job.

He glanced at his watch. It wanted three minutes to the time the police were to be called by Lorna. It would take them five minutes at the most to get there from the Yard.

He moved like lightning, collecting the photographs and stuffing them in his pocket, and then went to the safe. There were several jewels, some of them from the Kingley robbery, and a wad of banknotes. He knew the numbers of those stolen from Kingley's, and he knew when he saw these that there was ample evidence in the room to convict both Lake and Kulper.

Once he was away, the case would be over.

He swung out of the room, and raced down the stairs. This time he used the front door, unbolting it and wrenching it open. People were passing along Bramley Street as Mannering, the mask in his pocket, slammed the door and reached the pavement. At the corner he swung left, towards the Austin. In a flash he was sitting at the wheel, the clutch went in, the engine started. Mannering reversed and turned round, and as he reached the corner of the High Street he saw the police cars, with Chief-Inspector Bristow in the first one, looking as grim as the Baron had ever seen him.

Mannering kept his head low, but his smile was wide as he

passed the cars. He resisted a temptation to watch the police force an entry, but sped towards Westminster Bridge, and then Portland Place.

Brian Halliwell could call himself lucky.

Two hours after the detention of Kulper, Lake, and the third man – a brother of Theodore Greene it transpired – Chief-Inspector Bristow and Superintendent Lynch finished reading a long letter that had arrived shortly before, anonymous and yet exceptionally interesting.

It was typewritten, but not on the same machine as the letter Lynch had shown Mannering: that machine had been at Kulper's house, and was now at the Yard. Only Jackson, of the prisoners, was conscious, and had talked little. Bristow was pulling at his moustache as he realised the effect this epistle would have on the trio of prisoners.

It was a statement, carefully categorised, of the Baron's accusations at Bramley Street, and of Lake's admissions. It covered practically everything the police wanted to know, but it was the final paragraph that made Lynch's scowl.

“Suggested: That the police intimate to the three prisoners that this conversation was overheard by police officers, and witnesses are available. Even a suggestion that this is a fact will, it is believed, bring a complete confession, although Kulper will perhaps be more difficult than the others.”

“The nerve of the blighter!” growled Lynch. “He sends Jackson soaked in chloroform and I'm damned sure that cabby could talk. But b'God, Mannering's helped us to as nice a haul as we've had for a long time. Eldred will keep worrying us unless we get his stuff back, though ...”

“I don't see much chance,” said Bristow. “I can't imagine Kulper or Lake giving them up; the Greenses probably don't know where they are. Nor does Jackson.”

Lynch tapped his desk.

“Bill, I reckon Mannering was at Eldred's, and we made a

mistake. Jackson said they hired the Baron, who double-crossed them. Well—my idea of the double-cross is that Lake and Kulper tried it. They probably won't talk because they can prove nothing. We'll keep watching for Mannering, Bill, and those stones."

"If Mannering's got them," said Bristow without hesitation, "it's good-bye to them. But one day he'll slip up."

"I seem to have heard that before," said Lynch, with some sarcasm.

Thirty minutes afterwards, Lake, Jackson, and Greene had been formally charged, and had played their part. Kulper refused to talk. None of the talkers mentioned Mannering, but only the Baron. Lake had decided that he had made a big error in identifying the photograph, and Kulper was wondering, after all, whether he should have made Theodore Greene alter the negative, for the real Baron *might* have been fatfaced.

In any case, they had no evidence, and without it, silence was safest.

The Café Louise, near the Opera House in Paris, was one of the more pretentious along the Rue de l'Opera. Its tables were crowded despite the fact that it was nearing the middle of October. A warm sun shone from cloudless blue skies, making the hot, dry Paris atmosphere seem more tiring than usual. The deafening blare of motor horns and traffic rushing, the occasional shrill call of a traffic *gendarme's* whistle, the light tap-tap of the heels of women walking with short, sharp steps: everything seemed to be redolent of the gay city in early evening.

Lorna Fauntley, sitting at a table near a gangway to the interior of the café, and drinking iced lemonade, looked younger and more carefree.

"This is the fourth morning, John. The lady surely lied."

"She didn't make a habit of it," smiled the Baron. He stretched his legs back, eyeing the passing crowd contentedly. It was their fourth morning of vigil in Paris, but he wanted to see the Cat. She had told him he could find her there.

Three weeks might have tired her of Paris, although he doubted it. She would have read of Kulper's arrest, with Lake and the other Greene, and that may have sent her back to London.

The case against Brian Halliwell had been dropped, Plender had been mildly congratulatory, Mortimer Hackett, K.C., had complained bitterly about waste of time and the loss of a gorgeous case, Bristow and Lynch had to Mannering been noncommittal, but the Baron suspected they had been more pleased than they were prepared to show.

Brian Halliwell had been freed promptly, and was working again for Kingley's Ltd. Jackson and Kulper had been charged as accessories to Kingley's murder, Lake with the actual murder, while the Greenes and others of the gang faced robbery with violence charges. Marion's inheritance had been safely guarded: Mannering often wondered how nervous Lake must have been when he had tried that red-herring. The girl was staying for the time being with the Fauntleys.

The Baron had been busy in many ways. The jewels taken from Eldred's had been cashed through Leverson and both charities and Mannering's account had benefited. Most of the Kingley jewels had been recovered through Lake.

Now Mannering was waiting to see the Cat, and Lorna was openly amused.

She saw Mannering's lean, strong face in repose, saw him move, and turn his head as a tall, big-boned woman walked slowly past, looking for an empty table. She was more handsome than beautiful, and flamboyantly dressed. There was something cat-like in her swaying walk and the wariness of her amber eyes.

Mannering glanced down at Lorna as he stood up. Kate Loffatt half-turned, and Mannering reached her.

"Will you join us?"

The Cat swung round, her face set: and the smile that followed as she recognised Mannering was transfiguring.

She *was* beautiful, and Lorna Fauntley was momentarily startled.

“Why, Mannering—” That rich contralto voice throbbed.

Mannering shook hands, and led her to Lorna’s table. Lorna was uncertain of her reception. The Cat looked at her steadily, summing her up; and then she smiled and sat down.

“So this is Lorna? I don’t blame you, Mannering.”

“Thanks,” said the Baron, and he felt oddly elated. They talked idly for half an hour, before the Cat pushed her chair back.

“I’ll have to be going, but I’m glad you remembered the address, Mr. Mannering.” She was formal, and unfamiliar now.

“I meant to,” said the Baron, and he took something from his pocket that glittered like fire. He held it towards Kate Loffatt. For a moment she looked angry: and then the Baron set the thing in front of her.

It was a small, glittering diamond model of a cat, sprawled out and uncannily life-like: two small pieces of amber were set for its eyes. The Cat’s expression changed; there was a smile in her eyes, and her fine white teeth showed as she took the precious model and stared at it for a moment. Then she dropped it lightly into her bag.

“I’ll just say thanks,” she said, and turned away.

Series Information

*Published or to be published by
House of Stratus*

*Dates given are those of first publication
Alternative titles in brackets*

'The Baron' (47 titles) (writing as Anthony Morton)

'Department 'Z'' (28 titles)

'Dr. Palfrey Novels' (34 titles)

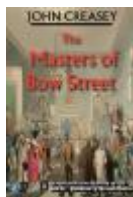
'Gideon of Scotland Yard' (22 titles)

'Inspector West' (43 titles)

'Sexton Blake' (5 titles)

'The Toff' (59 titles)

along with:



The Masters of Bow Street

This epic novel embraces the story of the Bow Street Runners and the Marine Police, forerunners of the modern police force, who were founded by novelist Henry Fielding in 1748. They were the earliest detective force operating from the courts to enforce the decisions of magistrates. John Creasey's account also gives a fascinating insight into family life of the time and the struggle between crime and justice, and ends with the establishment of the Metropolitan Police after the passing of Peel's Act in 1829.

‘The Baron’ Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Meet the Baron (*The Man in the Blue Mask*) (1937)
2. The Baron Returns (*The Return of the Blue Mask*) (1937)
3. The Baron Again (*Salute Blue Mask*) (1938)
4. The Baron at Bay (*Blue Mask at Bay*) (1938)
5. Alias the Baron (*Alias Blue Mask*) (1939)
6. The Baron at Large (*Challenge Blue Mask!*) (1939)
7. Versus the Baron (*Blue Mask Strikes Again*) (1940)
8. Call for the Baron (*Blue Mask Victorious*) (1940)
9. The Baron Comes Back (1943)
10. A Case for the Baron (1945)
11. Reward for the Baron (1945)
12. Career for the Baron (1946)
13. Blood Diamond (*The Baron and the Beggar*) (1947)
14. Blame the Baron (1948)
15. A Rope for the Baron (1948)
16. Books for the Baron (1949)
17. Cry for the Baron (1950)
18. Trap the Baron (1950)
19. Attack the Baron (1951)
20. Shadow the Baron (1951)
21. Warn the Baron (1952)
22. The Baron Goes East (1953)
23. The Baron in France (1953)
24. Danger for the Baron (1953)
25. The Baron Goes Fast (1954)
26. Nest-Egg for the Baron (*Deaf, Dumb and Blonde*) (1954)
27. Help from the Baron (1955)
28. Hide the Baron (1956)
29. The Double Frame (*Frame the Baron*) (1957)
30. Blood Red (*Red Eye for the Baron*) (1958)
31. If Anything Happens to Hester (*Black for the Baron*) (1959)
32. Salute for the Baron (1960)
33. The Baron Branches Out (*A Branch for the Baron*) (1961)
34. The Baron and the Stolen Legacy (*Bad for the Baron*) (1962)
35. A Sword for the Baron (*The Baron and the Mogul Swords*) (1963)
36. The Baron on Board (*The Mask of Sumi*) (1964)
37. The Baron and the Chinese Puzzle (1964)
38. Sport for the Baron (1966)
39. Affair for the Baron (1967)

40. The Baron and the Missing Old Masters (1968)
41. The Baron and the Unfinished Portrait (1969)
42. Last Laugh for the Baron (1970)
43. The Baron Goes A-Buying (1971)
44. The Baron and the Arrogant Artist (1972)
45. Burgle the Baron (1973)
46. The Baron - King Maker (1975)
47. Love for the Baron (1979)

Doctor Palfrey Novels

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Traitor's Doom (1942)
2. The Legion of the Lost (1943)
3. The Valley of Fear (*The Perilous Country*) (1943)
4. Dangerous Quest (1944)
5. Death in the Rising Sun (1945)
6. The Hounds of Vengeance (1945)
7. Shadow of Doom (1946)
8. The House of the Bears (1946)
9. Dark Harvest (1947)
10. The Wings of Peace (1948)
11. The Sons of Satan (1948)
12. The Dawn of Darkness (1949)
13. The League of Light (1949)
14. The Man Who Shook the World (1950)
15. The Prophet of Fire (1951)
16. The Children of Hate (*The Killers of Innocence; The Children of Despair*) (1952)
17. The Touch of Death (1954)
18. The Mists of Fear (1955)
19. The Flood (1956)
20. The Plague of Silence (1958)
21. Dry Spell (*The Drought*) (1959)
22. The Terror (1962)
23. The Depths (1963)
24. The Sleep (1964)
25. The Inferno (1965)
26. The Famine (1967)
27. The Blight (1968)
28. The Oasis (1970)
29. The Smog (1970)
30. The Unbegotten (1971)
31. The Insulators (1972)
32. The Voiceless Ones (1973)
33. The Thunder-Maker (1976)
34. The Whirlwind (1979)

Gideon Series

(Writing as JJ Marric)

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Gideon's Day (*Gideon of Scotland Yard*) (1955)
2. Seven Days to Death (*Gideon's Week*) (1956)
3. Gideon's Night (1957)
4. A Backwards Jump (*Gideon's Month*) (1958)
5. Thugs and Economies (*Gideon's Staff*) (1959)
6. Gideon Combats Influence (*Gideon's Risk*) (1960)
7. Gideon's Fire (1961)
8. A Conference for Assassins (*Gideon's March*) (1962)
9. Travelling Crimes (*Gideon's Ride*) (1963)
10. An Uncivilised Election (*Gideon's Vote*) (1964)
11. Criminal Imports (*Gideon's Lot*) (1965)
12. To Nail a Serial Killer (*Gideon's Badge*) (1966)
13. From Murder to a Cathedral (*Gideon's Wrath*) (1967)
14. Gideon's River (1968)
15. Darkness and Confusion (*Gideon's Power*) (1969)
16. Sport, Heat & Scotland Yard (*Gideon's Sport*) (1970)
17. Gideon's Art (1971)
18. No Relaxation at Scotland Yard (*Gideon's Men*) (1972)
19. Impartiality Against the Mob (*Gideon's Press*) (1973)
20. Not Hidden by the Fog (*Gideon's Fog*) (1975)
21. Good and Justice (*Gideon's Drive*) (1976)
22. Vigilantes & Biscuits (*Gideon's Force*) (1978)

Inspector West Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Inspector West Takes Charge (1942)
2. Go Away to Murder (*Inspector West Leaves Town*) (1943)
3. An Apostle of Gloom (*Inspector West At Home*) (1944)
4. Inspector West Regrets (1945)
5. Holiday for Inspector West (1946)
6. Battle for Inspector West (1948)
7. The Case Against Paul Raeburn (*Triumph for Inspector West*) (1948)
8. Inspector West Kicks Off (*Sport for Inspector West*) (1949)
9. Inspector West Alone (1950)
10. Inspector West Cries Wolf (*The Creepers*) (1950)
11. The Figure in the Dusk (*A Case for Inspector West*) (1951)
12. The Dissemblers (*Puzzle for Inspector West*) (1951)
13. The Case of the Acid Throwers (*The Blind Spot; Inspector West at Bay*) (1952)
14. Give a Man a Gun (*A Gun for Inspector West*) (1953)
15. Send Inspector West (1953)
16. So Young, So Cold, So Fair (*A Beauty for Inspector West; The Beauty Queen Killer*) (1954)
17. Murder Makes Haste (*Inspector West Makes Haste; The Gelignite Gang; Night of the Watchman*) (1955)
18. Murder: One, Two, Three (*Two for Inspector West*) (1955)
19. Death of a Postman (*Parcels for Inspector West*) (1956)
20. Death of an Assassin (*A Prince for Inspector West*) (1956)
21. Hit and Run (*Accident for Inspector West*) (1957)
22. The Trouble at Saxby's (*Find Inspector West; Doorway to Death*) (1957)
23. Murder, London - New York (1958)
24. Strike for Death (*The Killing Strike*) (1958)
25. Death of a Racehorse (1959)
26. The Case of the Innocent Victims (1959)
27. Murder on the Line (1960)
28. Death in Cold Print (1961)
29. The Scene of the Crime (1961)
30. Policeman's Dread (1962)
31. Hang the Little Man (1963)
32. Look Three Ways at Murder (1964)
33. Murder, London - Australia (1965)
34. Murder, London - South Africa (1966)
35. The Executioners (1967)

36. So Young to Burn (1968)
37. Murder, London - Miami (1969)
38. A Part for a Policeman (1970)
39. Alibi for Inspector West (1971)
40. A Splinter of Glass (1972)
41. The Theft of Magna Carta (1973)
42. The Extortioners (1974)
43. A Sharp Rise in Crime (1978)

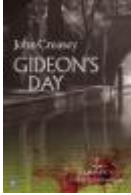
‘The Toff’ Series

These Titles can be read as a series, or randomly as standalone novels

1. Introducing the Toff (*It's the Toff!*) (1938)
2. The Toff Goes On (1939)
3. The Toff Steps Out (1939)
4. Here Comes the Toff (1940)
5. The Toff Breaks In (1940)
6. Salute the Toff (1941)
7. The Toff Proceeds (1941)
8. The Toff Goes to Market (1942)
9. The Toff Is Back (1942)
10. The Toff on the Trail (*short stories*) (1942)
11. The Toff among the Millions (1943)
12. Accuse the Toff (1943)
13. The Toff and the Deadly Priest (*The Toff and the Curate*) (1944)
14. The Toff and the Great Illusion (1944)
15. Feathers for the Toff (1945)
16. The Toff and the Lady (1946)
17. Poison for the Toff (*The Toff on Ice*) (1946)
18. Hammer the Toff (1947)
19. The Toff in Town (1948)
20. The Toff Takes Shares (1948)
21. The Toff and Old Harry (1949)
22. The Toff on Board (1949)
23. Fool the Toff (1950)
24. Kill the Toff (1950)
25. A Knife for the Toff (1951)
26. A Mask for the Toff (*The Toff Goes Gay*) (1951)
27. Hunt the Toff (1952)
28. Call the Toff (1953)
29. The Toff Down Under (*Break the Toff*) (1953)
30. Murder Out of the Past (*short stories*) (1953)
31. The Toff at Camp (*The Toff at Butlins*) (1954)
32. The Toff at the Fair (1954)
33. A Six for the Toff (*A Score for the Toff*) (1955)
34. The Toff and the Deep Blue Sea (1955)
35. Kiss the Toff (*Make-Up for the Toff*) (1956)
36. The Toff in New York (1956)
37. Model for the Toff (1957)
38. The Toff on Fire (1957)
39. The Toff and the Stolen Tresses (1958)

40. Terror for the Toff (*The Toff on the Farm*) (1958)
41. Double for the Toff (1959)
42. The Toff and the Runaway Bride (1959)
43. A Rocket for the Toff (1960)
44. The Toff and the Kidnapped (*The Kidnapped Child*) (1960)
45. Follow the Toff (1961)
46. The Toff and the Toughs (*The Toff and the Teds*) (1961)
47. A Doll for the Toff (1963)
48. Leave It to the Toff (1963)
49. The Toff and the Spider (1965)
50. The Toff in Wax (1966)
51. A Bundle for the Toff (1967)
52. Stars for the Toff (1968)
53. The Toff and the Golden Boy (1969)
54. The Toff and the Fallen Angels (1970)
55. Vote for the Toff (1971)
56. The Toff and the Trip-Trip-Triplets (1972)
57. The Toff and the Terrified Taxman (1973)
58. The Toff and the Sleepy Cowboy (1975)
59. The Toff and the Crooked Copper (1977)

Select Synopses



Gideon's Day

Gideon's day is a busy one. He balances family commitments with solving a series of seemingly unrelated crimes from which a plot nonetheless evolves and a mystery is solved. One of the most senior officers within Scotland Yard, George Gideon's crime solving abilities are in the finest traditions of London's world famous police headquarters. His analytical brain and sense of fairness is respected by colleagues and villains alike.



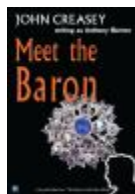
Gideon's Night

On this particular night Commander George Gideon has to deal with a couple of psychopaths who trail pain and blood in their wake. One targets infants, and the other young women on London's foggy streets. There's also an explosive gang war in the offing, and one way or another all of these cases are coming to their breathtaking conclusions at the same time. Can Scotland Yard's finest cope with such a nightmarish scenario, with what would ordinarily be months of time consuming police work crammed into just one night?



Gideon's Fire

Commander George Gideon of Scotland Yard has to deal successively with news of a mass murderer, a depraved maniac, and the deaths of a family in an arson attack on an old building south of the river. This leaves little time for the crisis developing at home ...



Meet the Baron

John Mannering (*The Baron*) makes his first appearance in this volume. Lord Fauntley cannot help showing off both his daughter and the security under which his precious jewels are kept. Mannering finds himself attracted to both.... Money is tight and so he plans a burglary, but this fails and unexpected consequences result. The relationship with Lorna Fauntley flourishes, and a series of high profile thefts and adventures ensure Mannering's future, so he believes, until Lorna equates him with *The Baron*. One of the many further twists in this award winning novel occurs when the police appear to seek Mannering's help, only to have everything turned upside down as the plot develops ...



Shadow The Baron

John Mannering ('*The Baron*') is called in by Scotland Yard's Superintendent Bristow to help catch the mysterious jewel thief '*The Shadow*'. No one knows the thief's identity, but he has managed to pull off many high profile robberies. However, as Mannering proceeds to track down the target, he finds the pursuer becomes the pursued. ...



The House of the Bears

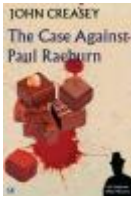
Standing alone in the bleak Yorkshire Moors is Sir Rufus Marne's '*House of the Bears*'. Dr. Palfrey is asked to journey there to examine an invalid - whom he finds has disappeared. Moreover, Marne's daughter lies terribly injured after a fall from the minstrel's gallery, which Dr. Palfrey discovers was no accident. He sets out to look into both matters, but the discoveries he makes are truly fantastic. A deserted mine, powerful explosive and a submarine all feature

in this powerful mystery. The results are even capable of surprising him ...



Inspector West Takes Charge

Extortion is the name of the game, as one victim after another is ruthlessly targeted. Chief Inspector Roger West must now solve the problem, along with a tangle of murders - but the case becomes more frightening as every minute passes.



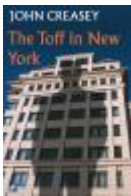
The Case Against Paul Raeburn

Chief Inspector Roger West has been watching and waiting for over two years - he is determined to catch Paul Raeburn out. The millionaire racketeer may have made a mistake, following the killing of a small time crook. Can the ace detective triumph over the evil Raeburn in what are very difficult circumstances? This cannot be assumed as not everything, it would seem, is as simple as it first appears.....



Introducing The Toff

The Toff is the Hon. Richard Rollison; the ultimate sleuth who revels in solving crimes. Whilst returning home across the Essex countryside from a day's cricket at his father's Norfolk home, he happens upon an accident that sets him on a new trail. This involves murder, suspense and thrilling action as The Toff applies his mind with its usual precision and thoroughness.



The Toff in New York

'Say, Miss Hall, I hope that brother of yours hasn't run into any trouble.' But Will Hall had been kidnapped and the Honourable Richard Rollison, known by many by the apt if absurd soubriquet of the 'Toff' is soon on the scene, but not before a murdered man had fallen into Valerie Hall's arms.

There's lots of action in 'millionaire surroundings', with a rich private eye and the NYPD all on the case, whilst the Toff tracks Dutch Himmy, surely the worst man in New York.....



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